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# **Silencing the Shame:** Forgetting of the 1920s Syphilis Epidemic in Buryat-Mongolia as a Strategy of Post-Soviet Identity Construction

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## *Introduction*

The Buryats are a Mongolian-speaking nationality living in a vast area in Southeast Siberia to the west and east of Lake Baikal. With a population of 461.389, they are the second largest Siberian indigenous ethnos after the Yakuts (478.085 people according to the 2010 population census).<sup>1</sup> The Buryats are a major northern branch of Mongols sharing traditional Mongolian nomadic culture. Historically, they were nomadic or semi-nomadic herders living in felt or wooden yurts, practicing Shamanism and, from the seventeenth century, Tibetan Buddhism. In the mid-seventeenth century, the Buryats were conquered by Russian Cossacks and incorporated into the Russian state. From 1822, they were under self-administration, but land reform and mass resettlement of Russian peasants to Buryat lands in the late nineteenth century put an end to it.

In the twentieth century, the Buryats experienced two major stages of ethnonational revival. The first one reached its heyday in a period from May 1923, when the Buryat-Mongolian autonomous republic was considered part of the The Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic to September 1937, when its territory was split into three smaller autonomies: one autonomous republic and two national districts amid the Russian-speaking regions.

The second stage commenced in the late 1980s as the colossus of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics started crumbling. Reconsideration of Soviet identity and its replacement with a new ethnopolitical Buryat identity were its characteristic features. This stage reached its apogee by 1992, when the Republic of Buryatia became a sovereign state within the Russian Federation. It subsided after President Putin's policy of regional enlargement resulted in the incorporation of two Buryat autonomous enclaves into the surrounding Irkutsk and Chita regions (January 1 and March 1, 2008, respectively).

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<sup>1</sup> Vserossiiskaya perepis' naseleniya (2010). Itogi perepisi naseleniya. Natsional'nyi sostav naseleniya [The

Both stages were parts of the same process of nation-building. As such, they display a certain degree of continuity and correlation of ethnopolitical and ethnosocial goals. However, they were essentially different in theoretical views and practical approaches to national consolidation.

Bolshevik-inspired nation-building of the 1920s strove for radical societal transformation based on rationality and class approach. The rhetoric of the epoch implied finality when it concerned obstacles on the way of socialist transformation. In this process, ethnonational was to be replaced by supranational, traditional culture and worldview were declared “backward” and had to give way to “socialist modernization” which was liberally borrowed from European social thought. Problems were identified and “eradicated” in the course of military-style campaigns, rather than rectified because of a calculated sequence of measures. As the famous slogan of that time read, nation-building was national mostly in form, but in its content it was thoroughly ideological, “socialist” in its Bolshevik interpretation.

Failure of the official Soviet ideology in the late 1980s required urgent creation of new flexible forms of ideological content. They had to be capable of mobilizing ethnicity by bringing Buryat communities together in a broad national revival project. Ethno-ideology was expressed in a new kind of national text: a colorful narrative with powerful imagery and broad historical associations serving as symbolic markers of ethnic and cultural collective memory.<sup>2</sup> This narrative is often referred to as “ethnonational discourse.” In order to appeal to all social strata of the Buryat community, it had to combine simplicity and brightness of images for the ease of perception with academic sophistication for added credibility of historical interpretation. This was, par excellence, a process of contemporary mythmaking.

Deconstruction of Buryat ethnonational discourse reveals several pivotal points around which most neo-myths revolved. In order to find a solid spiritual foundation for ethnic unity, post-socialist Buryat ideologues, like their counterparts in other national regions, turned to history, traditional culture, folklore, and religion. They believed that the idea of unity was already embedded in the historical and cultural ancestral heritage.

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<sup>2</sup> Darima Amogolonova et al., *Buryaty: sotsiokul'turnye praktiki perekhodnogo perioda* [Buryats: Socio-Cultural Practices of the Transition Period] (Irkutsk: SibPoligrafServis, 2008), 14.

However, in the Soviet period a considerable part of this heritage was ideologically altered, tabooed, or simply lost. In order to quickly reconstruct what remained of it and compensate losses, advocates of Buryat ethnonational revival resorted to what some scholars call “invented archaic”,<sup>3</sup> while others prefer a term “invention of traditions.”<sup>4</sup>

According to E. Hobsbawm, “inventing traditions ...is essentially a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past...” It happens more frequently during rapid societal transformations, when either old social patterns or institutional carriers and promulgators of ‘old traditions’ can no longer adapt to new conditions or survive in them.<sup>5</sup> Ancient materials are often used to construct invented traditions of a novel type for novel purposes. As Hobsbawm argues, “...A large store of such materials is accumulated in the past of any society and an elaborate language of symbolic practice and communication is always available. Sometimes new traditions could be easily grafted on old ones, sometimes they could be devised by borrowing... from official ritual, symbolism and moral exhortation—religion and princely pomp, folklore and freemasonry...”<sup>6</sup>

The Buryat ethnonational discourse was formed exactly during such transition when old Soviet national patterns failed and ethnic elites searched for new ones. In this process past historical events, characters, phenomena of traditional culture, spirituality, and ancient mythology were picked up, cleansed of unnecessary (or undesired) details, modified to fit the context of modernity, and used as mobilizing frames for the Buryat ethnonational revival. As Darima Amogolonova underlines, where possible, invented traditions tended to establish an unbreakable connection with the convenient historical past.<sup>7</sup>

Here, convenience or, rather, conscious selection of convenient historical facts is the key element. Not every historical event, character, and phenomenon agreed with the

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<sup>3</sup> Elena Stroganova, *Buryatskoe natsional'no-kul'turnoe vozrozhdenie* [The National-Cultural Revival of the Buryats] (Moscow-Irkutsk: Natalis, 2001), 75-77.

<sup>4</sup> Amogolonova et al., 16-17.

<sup>5</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 4-5.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Amogolonova et al., 17.

objectives of ethnonational revival. Heroic images of medieval Mongolian rulers, primarily Genghis Khan, castigated by Communist ideologues and cast into decades of forced oblivion, acquired new symbolic significance as icons of ethnic and spiritual unity of Buryats and Mongols and acted as a powerful means of ethnic identity consolidation. Heroes from the mythical age, such as Geser, the main character of apparently the largest and most ancient Central Asian epic poem, appropriated in the course of Buryat ethnonational revival, became pillars of the origin myth connecting the Buryats with ancient Tibet, home of Lamaism. At the same time, certain moments in the ethnic history of Buryats were deliberately omitted from the ethnonational discourse.

In the first place, they were facts and events whose interpretation might in any way mar the elaborate mythologized narrative of a new ethnic history by associations with or susceptibility to physical or moral decay, disease, and extinction. In my view, such things would never fit both mythology and martyrology of the new ethnic history since they evoked in people the uncomfortable feelings of shame, confusion, weakness, and disunity.

This study seeks to make sense of a vivid manifestation of such “omission” in the context of the post-Soviet Buryat ethnonational revival. It is focused on the rarely recollected problem of endemic syphilis in Buryat-Mongolia, which, on the eve of Buryat nation-building, demanded coordinated efforts of medical, educational, and executive Soviet authorities. Eventually the disease was eradicated. In a fight against it, the Bolsheviks even compromised with the ideological opponents by summoning foreign medical expertise. Surprisingly, this problem was quickly cast into oblivion. If in the 1920s it received significant attention of mass media, academics, and communist functionaries, after 1930 it was almost totally silenced. In the 1980s-1990s when the Buryat ethnonational discourse was formed, this problem was carefully avoided. In the early 1990s references to it appeared in Yuri Nagibin’s “Arise and Walk”<sup>8</sup> in a context that was considered offensive by some Buryat national ideologues. This stirred up some brief retort in the regional printed media and resentful words at habitual political demonstrations of that period. However, no objective journalistic or scholarly interpretation of this problem ensued. On the contrary, the retort receded to common grievances of a small nationality against a large and allegedly chauvinistic nation. This

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<sup>8</sup> Yuri Nagibin, *Vstan' i idi* [Arise and Walk]. Available at: <http://readr.ru/yuriy-nagibin-vstan-i-idi.html?page=4> (Accessed 16 December 2012).

reaction prompted an idea that obliteration of memories about the past epidemic in that particular context was more desirable than any attempt to reconstruct the events of the 1920s when, striving to modernize the Buryats in a Soviet manner, the Bolsheviks dealt a deadly blow to endemic syphilis in Buryat-Mongolia. Conscious suppression of “inconvenient history” was, indeed, as efficient a strategy of ethnonational identity construction as the invention of traditions and mythmaking.

This selective use of facts in the post-Soviet Buryat ethnonational discourse fits well into a conceptual framework of forgetting as a conscious, adaptive, and functional strategy. It is often used by individuals and groups to create a coherent and convenient environment in which real memories, edited memories, and invented traditions peacefully coexist to serve various purposes, including the development of ethnic awareness and ethnic mobilization. The concept belongs to Paul Connerton who singled out seven types of forgetting, each serving certain purposes and manifesting itself under various conditions.<sup>9</sup>

According to Connerton, forgetting is not a unitary phenomenon. Repressive erasure, often associated with totalitarian regimes, is considered the most brutal form of forgetting. It may be manifested in the “condemnation of memory,” when all tangible and, preferably, intangible heritage of persons labeled “enemies of the state” was destroyed to cast their names into irreversible oblivion. However, it may also be indirect and disguised, sometimes manifested only by a hint that one should look in a different direction.<sup>10</sup> Prescriptive forgetting is also a result of a state act. Unlike repressive erasure, it is often explicit since it is believed that such forgetting will be in the interests of all involved parties. When forgetting is considered more a gain than a loss and the emphasis is on the gain that, in Connerton’s words, “accrues to those who know how to discard memories that serve no practicable purpose in the management of one’s current identity and ongoing purposes,” it is forgetting that is constitutive in the formation of a new identity.<sup>11</sup> Structural amnesia is based on what is socially or practically more important in this or that context. Forgetting as annulment results from a surfeit of information and a capability of humans to store it in a form of archives or electronic data depositories allowing us to conveniently forget what we can easily retrieve from such memory

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<sup>9</sup> Paul Connerton, “Seven Types of Forgetting,” *Memory Studies* 1:59 (2008): 59-71.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 59-61.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.



storages. Forgetting as planned obsolescence results from the reality of the contemporary consumer society producing millions of new, soon to-be-forgotten items, whose product life cycle shortens in proportion to the speed of technological innovation. Finally, forgetting as a humiliated silence is defined by Connerton as “collusive silence brought on by a particular kind of collective shame” in which the scholar sees both a desire to forget and the actual effect of forgetting.<sup>12</sup>

In my opinion, the obliterated story of syphilis eradication in Buryat-Mongolia in the 1920s falls into at least three Connerton’s types of forgetting: repressive erasure, forgetting that is constitutive in the formation of a new identity, and forgetting as a humiliated silence. All three types of forgetting resulted from the twists and turns of the historical process of the making of Buryat statehood, including totalitarianism, building of a new identity during the post-perestroika ethnonational renaissance and hiding of some obscure collective shame resulting from both the legacy of totalitarian rule and necessity to create the new and attractive ethnonational historical narrative.

In an effort to illustrate the work of forgetting in the process of ethnonational identity construction, I concentrate attention on the following issues: 1) ideological, sociopolitical, and sociocultural significance of the anti-syphilis campaign in the process of Bolshevik social transformation in Buryat-Mongolia; 2) reasons for obliteration of this part of Buryat history in the public discourse of the 1930s-1980s; 3) reasons for suppression of this problem during the perestroika period and in the process of new ethnonational identity formation in the late 1980s-early 2000s; 4) relationships between forgetting the syphilis epidemic of the 1920s, mythmaking, and invention of traditions of the 1990s. My reasoning is placed into Paul Connerton’s theoretical framework explaining the intricacies of individual and collective forgetting in the context of rebuilding national identity.

*The problem of syphilis in Buryat-Mongolia in the 1920s: a socio-historical background*

The Buryat-Mongolian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was created on May 30, 1923. In line with Lenin’s national self-determination policy, the Buryats received a considerable degree of territorial and cultural autonomy. The period from

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 64-67.

1923 to the mid-1930s was marked by dynamic development of Buryat-Mongolian self-administration institutions, national culture, and health care.

Conveniently located at the USSR's Inner Asian frontier, Buryat-Mongolia became "an outpost of socialism in the Buddhist Orient." It was believed that the Buryat-Mongolian nation would represent a model of successful social transformation for other Asian peoples and thereby assist in the exportation of the socialist revolution to neighboring Asian states. Georgy Chicherin, the Soviet Union's People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs, wrote in a letter to Stalin on 12 June 1925, that the "... creation of the Buryat-Mongolian statehood within the autonomous Soviet republic had, first of all, a goal of the best influence of the USSR on the peoples of the Far East, their awakening and rapprochement with the USSR in a struggle against foreign imperialism."<sup>13</sup>

However, the fulfillment of such an important mission was impossible without colossal efforts to overcome numerous challenges related to underdevelopment. When it was founded, Buryat-Mongolia suffered from a virtual absence of economic infrastructure and chronic weaknesses in its social structures. Its population lived in abject poverty and was largely illiterate. Other problems included a pronounced lack of qualified staff for education and health care, rampant social diseases, high mortality, and low birth rates among the autochthones.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, in the 1920s in Buryat-Mongolia, the Soviets faced a strong challenge of transforming what they called "unenlightened people" of a former imperial periphery into a true socialist nation over a short period. A Buryat with a new socialist formation was envisaged as a thoroughly rational, civilized, modernized, and politically conscious representative of *Homo sapiens*. He or she had to be physically fit for building socialism, mentally sound enough to understand and absorb the basics of Marxist ideology, and capable of producing healthy future generations. Eventually this idealized human being

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<sup>13</sup> Alexander Elaev, *Buryatskii narod: stanovlenie, razvitiie, samoopredelenie* [The Buryat Nation: Formation, Development, Self-Determination] (Moscow: RAGS, 2000), 186.

<sup>14</sup> Buryat-Mongol'skaia Avtonomnaia Sovetskaia Sotsialisticheskaia Respublika (Materialy k otchetu IV s'ezda sovetov) 1926/27 – 1927/28 g.g. [The Buryat-Mongolian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (Materials for the Report at the Fourth Convention of the Soviets) 1926/27 – 1927/28] (Verkhenuinsk: Burgosizdat, 1929), 191.

was to become a pinnacle of a successful eugenics and social engineering program under the auspices of Joseph Stalin's nationality policy.<sup>15</sup>

Of all contagious diseases spread among the Buryats, syphilis was a major concern. Highly adaptive to the cultural environment, this disease was so widespread among the republic's nomadic native population that specialists at times spoke of 200,000 syphilitics out of a population of a little more than 500,000.<sup>16</sup> In some areas, Buryats had as many as thirty-eight times more registered cases of syphilis than Russians.<sup>17</sup>

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, Russian venereologists drew a clear distinction between the predominantly non-venereal syphilis in villages (*syphilis insontium*) and venereal syphilis in cities.<sup>18</sup> In remote areas such as Buryat-Mongolia, where practically no modern urban centers existed by the 1920s, syphilis was definitely considered as endemic (non-venereal). Soviet doctors described syphilis in Buryat-Mongolia as "the purely household infection." In their view, it originated in the traditional unkemptness of the Buryats, their lack of bathing, habits of sharing smoking pipes, uncleaned kitchen utensils, clothes, and bed-sheets. In essence, the "cultural barbarianism" of nomadic life was viewed as the main contributing factor for the spread of syphilitic infection.

Officials of the Buryat-Mongolian Commissariat of Public Health were specifically anxious about the long-term consequences of syphilis on the future generations. Considering the low birth rates among Buryats (about 17.6 per 1,000 compared to 45.5 per 1,000 among the Russians in 1924),<sup>19</sup> the high number of miscarriages, and widespread cases of congenital and tertiary syphilis, they feared the

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<sup>15</sup> Paula A. Michaels, *Curative Powers: Medicine and Empire in Stalin's Central Asia* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2003), 46-47.

<sup>16</sup> V.N. Zhinkin, "Toward the Question of the Spread of Syphilis in Buryatia. A Report by Dr. Zhinkin, 1926," Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Respubliki Buryatia [State Archive of the Republic of Buryatia], fund R-661, op. 1b, d. 1, l. 153.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 150 ob.

<sup>18</sup> Laura Engelstein, *The Keys to Happiness: Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de Siècle Russia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 167-169.

<sup>19</sup> V.N. Zhinkin, "Report by the Representative of the Buryat-Mongolian ASSR at the All-Union Central Executive Committee Chenkurov and Deputy People's Commissar of Health of the BMASSR Zhinkin to the Department of Maternity and Childhood Protection of the People's Commissariat of Health of the RSFSR, 10 March 1926," Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Respubliki Buryatia [State Archive of the Republic of Buryatia], fund R-661, op. 1b, d. 1, l. 154.

extinction of the Buryats, or, at least, a dramatic reduction of their numbers.<sup>20</sup> This scenario would be contrary to the Bolshevik mission of a new socialist Buryat-Mongolian nation as a showcase of Communist nation-building. Undoubtedly, it would also gravely contradict with the grand Bolshevik plan of bringing the Buryats (and other Asiatic peoples of Soviet Russia) from feudalism directly to socialism, bypassing the stage of capitalism.

To confront and solve this problem, from 1924 onward the leadership of the Buryat-Mongolian republic, with full support from Moscow, embarked on a long and costly but—in the final analysis—effective anti-syphilis campaign. It comprised several stages, including thorough medical examinations of the population and painstaking research on the origins, characteristics, consequences, and treatment of syphilis among Buryats and Russians. The results were not purely scientific or clinical discoveries, but a comprehensive analysis of the social construction of syphilis in different areas of Buryat-Mongolia.<sup>21</sup>

Syphilis was seen as impossible to eradicate without radically transforming the traditional lifestyle of the Buryats by “acculturating” them. In this sense, the anti-syphilis campaign was part and parcel of the Bolshevik cultural revolution. As such, it comprised vigorous propaganda related to personal hygiene, sexual moderation, sobriety, protection of maternity and infancy, basic sexual and hygienic education, and the rehabilitation of prostitutes, unemployed, and criminal women, and other suspected carriers of the disease. It also involved a system of measures against traditional medicine, widely practiced by lama healers, shamans, and quacks and promotion of European medicine. Overall, the eradication of syphilis was an inseparable element of the Bolshevik-style social modernization, which intended to replace the “backwardness” of the ancient nomadic culture with communal hygiene, the “superstitions” of Tibetan and Mongolian medicine with Wassermann blood serology tests and antiluetic drugs, and the traditional pantheon with new loyalties to abstract Communist ideas and atheistic ideologues.

In addition, the Russian People’s Commissariat of Public Health took advantage of foreign expertise. At the time, medical doctors from Germany were at the cutting edge

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 152 ob., 153.

<sup>21</sup> Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 245.

of clinical research in syphilology. Through the networks of the USSR's Academy of Sciences as well as personal connections of Professor Volf Moiseevich Bronner, founder of the State Venereologic Institute in Moscow, the Buryat-Mongolian case attracted considerable attention among German venereologists. The international transfer of knowledge was carried out through a joint Soviet-German medical expedition to study syphilis in Buryat-Mongolia in 1928.

The 1920s Soviet anti-syphilis campaign in Buryat-Mongolia was exemplary in the sense that it reflected most contradictions between the old "backward" traditional living and the new vigorous socialist lifestyle in one national autonomous republic. Of course, the problem was not unique to Buryat-Mongolia. For centuries, tuberculosis and syphilis were the scourge of Siberian autochthones. However, it was in Buryat-Mongolia that several important factors overlapped, making the eradication of syphilis there internationally known.

Buryat-Mongolia's geopolitical openness to the Buddhist East, close linguistic and cultural ties with the Mongols of Outer Mongolia, Manchuria, Xingjian, and Tibet, the peculiar mix of cultures, religions, and races in the Soviet Inner Asian borderland, and some accidental luck (the fact that Volf Bronner was from Buryatia and studied at Tomsk University together with A.T. Trubacheev, the People's Commissar of Public Health of BMASSR), predetermined broad publicity. Public discussion of this problem in press, scientific publications in internationally renowned journals, documentaries, personal diaries, and archival sources became "memory cards" that prevented its irreversible oblivion.

As soon as the bonds of ideology fell off, the problem immediately popped up in Western historical science as a successful example of the Soviet-German medical cooperation of the 1920s. Yet, in domestic and especially in Buryat historiography and opinion journalism, this theme remained concealed even during the most active stages of ethnonational revival.

*Social and cultural implications of the syphilis problem in Buryat-Mongolia, late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 1920s*

In order to understand the intricacies of conscious forgetting, it is important to look into the social construction of syphilis in Buryat-Mongolia by Russian and Soviet physicians. Was there any definite paradigm that explained the spread of infection among the Buryats? How did medical viewpoints shape the popular perception of syphilis and how did they echo sixty years later, when the new ethnonational discourse was constructed?

Laura Engelstein did an elaborate analysis of views prevalent among the Russian doctors on syphilis and its social nature in the late nineteenth century. She argues that unlike their European colleagues, Russian doctors tended to look for epidemiological clues not in the clinical picture of the disease, but in its social and cultural context. Many of them were county physicians working in the countryside. They shared the populist commitment to act in the interest of the common people, educating them and raising their cultural level. It was their “distinctive medicopolitical ethos.”<sup>22</sup>

In the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, Russian medical observers unanimously characterized rural syphilis as endemic and non-venereal in origin. They saw it “not as the result of sexual promiscuity, the egotistic search for private pleasure in disregard of the collective norm, but as the result of social promiscuity, a reflection of collective tyranny and the weakness of self.” They viewed the peasant community as a deeply traditional milieu in which there was hardly a place for sexuality and, therefore, in Engelstein’s words, “they persistently rejected evidence of sexual misbehavior that testified to the crumbling of traditional bonds.”<sup>23</sup>

Poverty and ignorance were perceived as the main contributing factors in the spread of syphilis. The crowding of children in village huts, the impossibility of observing proper hygiene standards under conditions of grueling poverty, carelessness stemming from general ignorance, and unfamiliarity with the specific nature of the disease were listed as the causes of rural syphilis. In fact, the pre-revolutionary Russian physicians called syphilis “the Russian people’s everyday disease.”<sup>24</sup> Twenty years later in Buryat-Mongolia, their Soviet colleagues would refer to it as “the purely household infection.”

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<sup>22</sup> Engelstein, 175.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

Both of these characteristics imply that backwardness was the main cause of syphilis in a Russian wooden hut and in a Buryat felt yurt alike. However, a novelty in the Bolshevik interpretation was that backwardness and diseases were “the heavy legacy of tsarism” and their elimination would signify victory of socialism over grim rudiments of the imperial past.

Another important circumstance was that the old Russian physicians characterized syphilis as an invisible but dangerous enemy threatening national honor and security.<sup>25</sup> Soviet doctors effortlessly borrowed this image and built it into their own agenda, adding to it the Bolshevik rhetoric of class struggle. Overall, they quite comfortably appropriated the conceptual framework developed by their predecessors in constructing social and cultural causes of syphilis, defining backwardness, ignorance, and superstition as the main culprits.

In the 1920s, syphilis in Buryat-Mongolia was unanimously defined as the disease of the natives. Doctors also highlighted a clear cultural pattern in its geographical distribution. The situation in western Buryat-Mongolian *aimaks* (districts) was better than in eastern ones. In their reports based on data, gathered during expeditions by venereologic detachments west and east of Lake Baikal, Soviet physicians noticed that western Buryats were generally more “civilized” than their eastern counterparts. Most people in the west were sedentary or semi-sedentary, whereas eastern Buryats were nomadic herders. Western Buryats were at least partially aware of the destructive character of the “malicious ulcer,” as they named syphilis.<sup>26</sup>

The sexual habits of Buryats represented another important research aspect. In the 1920s, physicians pointed out that while the sexuality of rural Russians had been sufficiently researched, the sex life of Soviet national minorities remained largely unstudied. For early Soviet social venereology, knowledge of sexual habits was extremely important to develop preventive measures against venereal diseases.<sup>27</sup> The staff of all venereologic detachments in Buryat-Mongolia took care to investigate the sexual practices of native people that could spread syphilis. During field trips, they interviewed

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>26</sup> G.A. Nagibin, “Tuberkulez i sifilis sredi Buryat i russkikh Alarskogo aimaka” [TB and Syphilis among Buryats and Russians of the Alarskii District], *Zhizn' Buryatii* [The Life of Buryatia], no. 4-6 (1928): 126-127.

<sup>27</sup> A.M. Pesterev, “Polovoi byt Buryat” [The Sexual Life of Buryats], *Zhizn' Buryatii* [The Life of Buryatia], no. 7 (1930): 89.

dozens of patients about their sex lives, habits, and preferences. Some of the data was later published. This gave us the chance to look closer upon this side of life of Buryats.

Several doctors highlighted the fact that in the shabbiness and overcrowding of traditional Buryat dwellings, children of a very young age would regularly witness the sexual relations of their parents, growing accustomed to this aspect of life. Moreover, being herders, they constantly observed and closely studied the sexual behavior of domesticated animals, not finding anything disgusting or shameful about it.

Dr. A.M. Pesterev, who worked in venereologic detachments in the remote Khorinskii and Eravninskii districts in 1925-27 and in Zakamenskii district in 1930, studied the characteristics of the sex life of Buryats. He calculated that 55.7 percent of Buryat-Mongolian men and 78.7 percent of women began sexual activity very early. The most common ages were 14, 15 and 16.<sup>28</sup> Pesterev stated that in 45 percent of cases, women began having sexual relations well before their first menstruation. He attributed this to the fact that regardless of their age, Buryat-Mongolian women were often sexually abused by men.<sup>29</sup>

Among the factors contributing to the early beginning of sex life and lax sexual behavior, Pesterev singled out the following:

- Overcrowding in yurts;
- The almost exclusively meat and dairy diet of Buryats, which induced sexual arousal;
- Alcohol abuse, a rather widespread addiction among many indigenous peoples;
- Horse riding as the most common way of transportation, which stimulates erogenous zones from a very early age;
- Absence of cultural needs, which makes sexual intercourse a sort of entertainment;
- High infant mortality in Buryat families, which made children the main purpose of marriage. A childless man would abandon his sterile wife and look for another woman until he had children; women were very afraid not to bear children, since sterility was considered a social stigma;
- Ignorance about venereal disease. People would not stop their sexual activity even when infected, spreading the disease. In most cases, eastern Buryats did not associate syphilis and gonorrhea with sexual activity. In fact, many people thought gonorrhea was a normal physiological process with men, much like menstruation with women;

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 90-91.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 93.



- No tradition of sexual abstention. Because family and religion did not regulate the sex life of Buryats, people had many sex partners, which caused the spread of syphilis and gonorrhea.<sup>30</sup>

While some of these assumptions look naïve or speculative today, others suggest that like his pre-revolutionary Russian colleagues, Pesterev found the roots of syphilis in sociocultural conditions rather than sexual superfluity. He clearly understood that nation-building finally gave the indigenous peoples of Siberia a long-awaited chance to eliminate syphilis. Therefore, Pesterev concluded:

The task of social venereology in the course of building up of the curative and preventive measures should be the urgent sanitation of the sexual life and family life in general in order to paralyze infections like syphilis and gonorrhea, whose further spread may lead to the extinction of the Buryat nationality. The ethnic perspectives of the Buryat nationality greatly depend on how early and intensively the fight against the old life and sexual habits will start.<sup>31</sup>

The Soviet specialists called for immediate action to eradicate the old habits and transform the social environment of the Buryats in such a way that infections would find no way of transmission. As can be inferred from the quotes above, they found the roots of disease in almost every aspect of traditional nomadic life, from meat and dairy diet to horse riding and cattle breeding. Elimination or, at least, considerable alteration of these factors was viewed as a prerequisite of success in the fight against syphilis. However, implementation of this policy led to a gradual disappearance of important practices and significant markers of traditional lifestyle: horse riding, premarital matching, traditional games and sports, replaced by the universal mass entertainment like cinema, popular music, dances, shopping, and alcohol.

In the social context, traditional Buryat lifestyle and its main attributes meant “backwardness” for the Soviet physicians. The “uncivilized” state of Buryat nomads prevented them from not only eliminating the scourge of social diseases, but also from becoming people of “socialist generation”—healthier, stronger, mentally sound, more creative and prolific for the building of socialism. Such rhetoric, though perfectly understandable at the socialist stage of Buryat ethnonational revival, was unacceptable at the stage when the Soviet ideology degraded and collapsed. For the Buryat ethnonational ideologues, such “pragmatic” transformations of the traditional life seemed inappropriate

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 98.

since they were detrimental to the very pillar of new ethnonational discourse—the traditional Buryat culture, nomadic lifestyle, and national worldview.

*Forgetting the problem of syphilis in Buryat-Mongolia, 1930s to 1990s: an interpretation*

The 1920s campaign against syphilis in Buryat-Mongolia took place during a period of relative openness or public discourse when topical issues of national policy were discussed in press, scientific periodicals, and books. Stories about the fight against venereal diseases regularly appeared in the local daily, *Buryat-Mongol'skaya Pravda*, from 1923 to 1930.<sup>32</sup> Some articles contained sharp criticism of the Buryat Peoples' Commissariat of Public Health.<sup>33</sup> The work of the 1928 Soviet-German medical expedition received detailed coverage in the articles, written by representatives of *Burnarkomzdrav*, where they closely followed the achievements of the international team of doctors.<sup>34</sup> Scientific articles by Soviet venereologists and reports of venereologic detachments were regularly published in the local journal, *Zhizn Buryatii*, from 1924 to 1930.

Why did this problem disappear from public discourse in the 1930s? Was it totally eradicated or just obliterated and removed from the forefront of public debate to its remote margins? In my opinion, there are several reasons and explanations.

First of all, the 1920s anti-syphilis campaign generally reached its planned goals. According to V.M. Bronner, the number of infectious syphilis cases in certain districts of Buryat-Mongolia dramatically decreased. For example, in the mid-1920s in Kizhinginskii *aimak* (district) there were 87 infectious cases per 1550 examined Buryat patients, whereas in 1928 this number only equaled 12 per 1537 examined Buryats.<sup>35</sup> Through international scientific networks, the Soviets accumulated enough experience to develop and produce their own anti-syphilis drugs as pharmacologically effective as the German

<sup>32</sup> “Na bor’bu s venericheskimi bolezniami. Zdorov’e trudiaschikhsia – delo samikh trudiaschikhsia” [Against the Venereal Disease. The Health of Proletariat is the Concern of the Proletariat], *Buryat-Mongol'skaya Pravda* [The Buryat-Mongolian Pravda], 2 February 1928, no. 27.

<sup>33</sup> “Chto skazal Narkomzdrav o sifilise” [What the Peoples' Commissariat of Health Said about Syphilis], *Buryat-Mongol'skaya Pravda* [The Buryat-Mongolian Pravda], 4 February 1929, no. 29.

<sup>34</sup> “Tseli i zadachi russko-germanskoj ekspeditsii.” [Goals and Objectives of the Russian-German Expedition], *Buryat-Mongol'skaya Pravda* [The Buryat-Mongolian Pravda], 17 July 1928, no. 161; “Rezultaty raboty russko-germanskoj ekspeditsii” [Results of the Russian-German Expedition], *Buryat-Mongol'skaya Pravda* [The Buryat-Mongolian Pravda], 29 August 1928, no. 198.

<sup>35</sup> V.M. Bronner, “K tretiemu vsesoyuznomu s'ezdu po bor’be s venericheskimi boleznyami” [Toward the Third All-Union Convention Against Venereal Diseases], *Zdravookhranenie* [Health Care], no. 5 (1929), 9.

*Salvarsan*.<sup>36</sup> Though in general, the situation with venereal diseases in the USSR still remained difficult, there was definite progress in the most problematic areas—national autonomous republics and the countryside. With the gradual solution of the syphilis problem in Buryat-Mongolia, this theme gave way to new problematic issues. By the early 1930s, collectivization and industrialization were firmly placed in the center of the official discourse.

Second, Stalin’s “revolution from above” totally changed theoretical and practical approaches to problems of man and society. The five-year-plan rhetoric devaluated individual problems promoting gigantomania and depersonalization instead. In their efforts to adapt to ideological twists of the 1930s, scientists and public figures openly condemned their earlier ideas, proclaimed new lines and approaches that complied with the new policy. For instance, in the light of the Seventeenth Party Conference V.M. Bronner criticized his own humanistic views in the field of social venereology and proposed to turn away from the 1928 slogan that read “Syphilis is not shame, but misfortune.” Instead, he maintained that “in the keen struggle for new life, for the fulfillment of the Party’s directives ... for the fulfillment and over-fulfillment of the plan each case of venereal disease should be realized by a diseased person as impeding this struggle.”<sup>37</sup>

In this way, the former “misfortune” and the “century-old social scourge” turned into the social stigma. In 1939, the Peoples’ Commissariat of Public Health of the USSR required mandatory registering of all exposed cases of venereal diseases.<sup>38</sup> Informing families and employers about suspected or exposed cases of venereal diseases became a routine practice. As the perception of venereal disease changed, this problem acquired shameful connotations and was pushed out to the margins of public discourse.

Third, the Great Terror of 1937-1938 decimated Soviet medicine. Many doctors who participated in the 1920s international scientific cooperation perished in it. V.M.

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<sup>36</sup> V.M. Bronner, “Itogi Tret’ego Vsesoyuznogo S’ezda po bor’be s venericheskimi boleznyami” [The Results of the Third All-Union Convention Against Venereal Diseases], *Zdravookhranenie* [Health Care], no. 7 (1929): 12-13.

<sup>37</sup> G.I. Mavrov, “Istoriya venerologii (soobshchenie 3). Venerologiya v Rossii i SSSR v XX veke” [History of Venereology (Report 3). Venereology in Russia and the USSR in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century], *Dermatologiya ta venerologiya* [Dermatology and Venereology], no. 3 (2009): 87.

<sup>38</sup> Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Respubliki Buryatia [State Archive of the Republic of Buryatia], fund R-209, op. 1, d. 1, l. 1, 1 ob.

Bronner, one of the founders of Soviet social venereology, was arrested on the accusations of terrorism and espionage in 1937 and executed in 1939. The Soviet participants of the 1928 Soviet-German medical expedition for many years lived in fear of arrest and avoided talking about the events of the summer of 1928. Only in the 1980s, some of them told about the expedition and the syphilis problem in Buryat-Mongolia.<sup>39</sup> In this way, the problem of syphilis in Buryatia acquired an additional taboo. Speaking or writing about it brought a person dangerously close to the proscribed aspect of the Soviet-German medical cooperation in the 1920s.

Finally, as the educational, cultural, and intellectual level of the Buryats grew, some aspects of recent history became “uncomfortable.” New social status and perspectives necessitated a search for higher benchmarks and “positive” developmental indicators, such as the per capita ratio of higher education or Ph.D. degrees, whereas former social problems such as illiteracy and diseases were deliberately avoided. The 1920s rhetoric of socialist modernization with its concentration on fighting “backwardness” and the *mission civilisatrice* gradually became obsolete and even offensive against the background of quantitative achievements.

For these reasons, the syphilis epidemic of the 1920s was, for a long time, obliterated in the Soviet and post-Soviet Buryat historiography. The totalitarian legacy of Stalinism, when many remarkable figures were labeled as “enemies of the people” and practices were condemned as “sabotage,” or “false theories” and cast into forced oblivion under a threat of severe political repression, turned the history of the anti-syphilis campaign into an unspoken taboo. It was not just inappropriate to recollect it in historical research or opinion journalism, but also risky because it invoked dangerous associations with repressed “enemies of the people” and their “aberrations.” In this, forgetting of the 1920s syphilis epidemic was clearly a result of repressive erasure.

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<sup>39</sup> Around 1983-1984, I learned about the 1928 Soviet-German expedition from Tatiana Ivanovna Semyonova, the retired oldest venereologist in Buryatia, who happened to be my best friend's grandmother. In 1928, being a medical student of Irkutsk State University, she participated in the expedition and remembered many episodes from it. She also gave an interview to historian D.B. Batoev, who authored several books on the history of medicine in Buryatia. See: D.B. Batoev et al. *Pervyi narkom Andrei Timofeevich Trubacheev v istorii zdavookhraneniya Buryatii* [The First People's Commissar Andrei Timofeevich Trubacheev in the History of Healthcare in Buryatia], (Ulan-Ude, 2009).

Obliteration continued after the breakup of the USSR. Probably the only monograph giving this problem due attention is a recent study by D. Batoev et al.<sup>40</sup> A published historian of medicine, Dondok Batoev could not have avoided this theme because it is so richly documented in the archives. However, even in this book, the syphilis problem is only considered in the connection with the professional activity of the first Buryat People's Commissar of Health A.T. Trubacheev. In most post-Soviet books on the history of Buryatia, this problem is euphemistically named "problem of social diseases." For example, the influential book by Alexander Elaev only mentions that "epidemics, venereal diseases, tuberculosis and high infant mortality were a scourge of Buryat population," and this refers to the imperial period, not the years of active nation-building after 1923.<sup>41</sup>

Other ideologues of Buryat national revival fiercely refuted any references to 'degrading Buryat-Mongolian people'. For instance, Shirab Chimitdorjiev wrote,

People ever forget their spiritual and cultural heritage, their outstanding representatives... People reject persons lacking memory. Unfortunately, the "oblivious" can be easily met nowadays. Do these persons really think that before 1917 Buryat-Mongols were depopulating, wild and completely illiterate people...? Perhaps, one should prove with facts and show them that they are absolutely wrong...<sup>42</sup>

It is interesting that a well-known ideologue of Buryat national movement S. Chimitdorjiev referred to the pre-revolutionary status of the Buryats in a manner diametrically opposite to the ideologues of Bolshevik social modernization of the 1920s. Contrary to the concept of backwardness and central to the rhetoric of the 1920s, he critically addressed those who believed it and called upon them to reconsider their aberrations. In doing so, he referred to the outstanding Buryats from the pre-Soviet epochs, a broad category that ranges from tribal chieftains to enlighteners and national democrats.

It is hardly believable that such highly qualified and deserved historian inadvertently forgot about the wealth of primary sources and statistics related to the social and medical problems of the 1920s kept in the regional archives. Likewise, it could not escape his memory that before the 1920s, the Buryats did not have any centralized healthcare and educational systems and, consequently, any precise statistical data about

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<sup>40</sup> D.B. Batoev et al.

<sup>41</sup> Elaev, 204.

<sup>42</sup> S.B. Chimitdorjiev, *Buryat-Mongoly: istoriya i sovremennost'. Razdum'ya mongoloveda* [Buryat-Mongols: History and Contemporaneity. Thoughts of a Mongolist]. Ulan-Ude, 2000. p. 4.

the pre-1917 period is barely available. Yet, Chimitdorjiev's reasoning refers us to some obscure historical periods where single, but monumental figures of distinguished Buryats conveniently stand out to outweigh mass illiteracy and rampant social problems of the Buryat people.

At this point, a concept of the "convenient past" again comes to mind. National intellectuals who created the post-perestroika ethnonational discourse liberally referred to both distant and relatively recent past, associating their own search of identity foundations with the activity of the outstanding representatives of the Buryat people. They especially appealed to the Buryat "national democrats" such as Tsyben Jamtsarano, Elbeg-Dorji Rinchino, Bazar Baradiin, Gombojab Tsybikov and Agvan Dorjiev, whose ethnonational activities started around the turn of the twentieth century and reached their prime by 1917. In doing so, the contemporary intellectuals looked for similarities between the situation at the beginning of the twentieth century and over eighty years after, during the collapse of the USSR in a hope of finding answers to difficult questions. Another purpose of referring to the past achievements was gaining a solid foundation in history.<sup>43</sup>

Meanwhile, "inconvenient" historical facts remained out of the emerging ethnonational discourse. Returning to Paul Connerton's theoretical rendering of forgetting as an adaptive and functional phenomenon, this case conveniently falls into the type of forgetting that he calls "forgetting that is constitutive in the formation of a new identity." The author of the concept formulates this type as follows,

...There is, for instance, the forgetting of the details of grandparents' lives that are not transmitted to grandchildren whose knowledge about grandparents might in no way conduce to, but rather detract from, the effective implementation of their present intentions... Not to forget might... provoke too much cognitive dissonance: better to consign some things to a shadow world... What is allowed to be forgotten provides living space for present projects.<sup>44</sup>

This type of forgetting applied to the situation explains much in the mechanism of interaction between mythmaking, inventing traditions and forgetting in the context of creating a new Buryat identity. In the context of ethnonational revival, mythmaking defied weakness and imperfections. On the contrary, through bright and glorious images of mythological heroes it gave a powerful boost to national consciousness and a new Buryat identity. Memories about past sickness tabooed in the Soviet everyday discourse

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<sup>43</sup> Stroganova, 68-69.

<sup>44</sup> Connerton, 63.

were allowed to be forgotten. Thus, forgetting freed living space for glorifying the past and associating it through the present with the optimistic future.

Finally, Connerton's seventh type of forgetting that fits the context of Buryat ethnonational discourse is "forgetting as humiliated silence." As the author puts it,

This type of forgetting is certainly not solely, and may in large part be not at all, a matter of overt activity on the part of state apparatus. It is manifest in a widespread pattern of behavior in civil society, and it is covert, unmarked and unacknowledged. Its most salient feature is humiliated silence.<sup>45</sup>

Many problems tabooed in the Soviet social discourse evolved into social stigmata. Prostitution, homosexuality, and venereal diseases were on the list. Memories of the syphilis epidemic in the recent past of the Buryat people humiliated national feelings through implied associations with promiscuity, social ills, decaying morals. There was no reference to opinions of the Soviet doctors that syphilis in Buryatia was primarily a problem of hygiene and social conditions. The social stigma of syphilis prevented balanced discussion of this problem even during the perestroika years. Quite the contrary, references to this problem immediately became political issues that threatened carefully constructed mythological subject matter of a new ethnonational discourse. Silence and forgetting were more convenient.

In making sense of the phenomenon of forgetting in the context of the Buryat ethnonational revival, it is hard to disagree with Ineke Wessel and Michelle Moulds who commented on Connerton's theoretical framework from the viewpoint of individual and group psychology. They maintained that repressive erasure and forgetting that is constitutive in the formation of a new identity share the property of deliberately shaping the group's past in order to fit its current goals. Forgetting as humiliated silence is future oriented and seems to be concerned with shaping a new identity. Wessel and Moulds argue that the common denominator here is that forgetting serves the shaping and maintaining of a group's identity (past, present, and future) by adapting history, selecting what is stored from the present, and choosing what direction to take to preserve that new identity.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Connerton, 67.

<sup>46</sup> Ineke Wessel and Michelle Moulds, "How Many Types of Forgetting? Comments on Connerton," *Memory Studies*, no. 1 (2008), 291.

In their comment to Connerton, Wessel and Moulds rightly state that while there may be many motives for an individual, a generation, or a nation to forget particular events, details, or facts, all Connerton's types of forgetting might be understood in terms of one general principle—striving for coherence within a structural collectivistic memory system.<sup>47</sup> In the context of the Buryat ethnonational discourse, they manifest in keeping the narrative idealistically coherent, that is, clean from any imperfections that might otherwise mar the immaculate image of mythologized past and prevent it from serving its mobilizing role at present.

### *Conclusions*

The two stages of Buryat ethnic revival in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries were parts of the same process of nation-building and as such, they display a certain degree of continuity and correlation of ethnopolitical and ethnosocial goals. Both were aimed at the internal consolidation of the Buryats in the process of forging a nation bound by common history, geographical space, language and culture. Yet, the nation-forming activities of the 1920s were concentrated on building institutional infrastructure and the eradication of social problems such as infectious diseases and the improvement of demographic characteristics of the Buryats, including heredity and fertility. The main principle of that stage was the overcoming of “backwardness.” In the ideological vision of the Bolsheviks, the backwardness manifested itself in traditional culture, worldview, sacral and profane practices, and the ancient social structure of nomadic society. The principal goal was socialist modernization that would provide incentive for socialist revolution by the “oppressed” people of East and Inner Asia.

The ethnic revival that started in the late 1980s was mostly aimed at the internal consolidation of the Buryat nation on ethnonational principles. In this process, new flexible forms of ideological content were developed. Ethno-ideology was expressed in a new kind of national text: a colorful narrative with powerful imagery and broad historical associations serving as symbolic markers of ethnic and cultural collective memory. Mythmaking and the invention of traditions were instrumental in the creation of the new Buryat ethnonational discourse.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 292.



In the course of ethnic revival, some facts of the relatively recent history were obliterated. A vivid example was the syphilis epidemic of the 1920s and the Soviet campaign to its eradicate it. On the eve of Buryat nation-building, it was a big problem demanding coordinated efforts of medical, educational, and executive Soviet authorities. In a fight against it, the Bolsheviks even had to compromise with the ideological opponents by summoning foreign medical expertise. Eventually, the syphilis problem was solved. However, due to a number of interconnected reasons it disappeared from public discourse from the early 1930s to the present day.

In the process of constructing the new ethnonational discourse, the ideologues of Buryat ethnic revival carefully avoided this problem. It was “inconvenient” for the nascent narrative of new ethnic history since it evoked uncomfortable feelings of shame and confusion. This selective use of history fits well into Paul Connerton’s conceptual framework of forgetting as a conscious, adaptive, and functional strategy. It is often used by individuals and groups to create a coherent and convenient environment in which real memories, edited memories, and invented traditions peacefully coexist to serve various purposes, including the development of ethnic awareness and ethnic mobilization.

In the context of the Buryat ethnonational revival, the syphilis problem was closely associated with ideological taboos imposed by Stalin’s regime, uncomfortable feelings of dishonor and shame stemming from the cultural perception of venereal diseases that formed in the 1930s–1980s and humiliating notions of backwardness and low culture that originated in the rhetoric of the 1920s socialist modernization. Though routinely used in the 1920s, they were inappropriate and even offensive in the cultural context of the 1980s.

Placed in the conceptual framework of forgetting as a conscious strategy, the 1920s syphilis problem represents a clear case of three types of forgetting. They are: repressive erasure, forgetting that is constitutive in the formation of a new identity, and forgetting as a humiliated silence. This combination of forgetting types served the purpose of shaping and maintaining of a group’s identity (past, present, and future) by adapting history to the current goals of ethnonational consolidation and choosing direction to preserve the new identity. In the context of the Buryat ethnonational discourse, all three types strove to keep the coherence of the ethnonational discourse.

They protected the immaculate image of mythologized past. In trying to create a colorful and attractive narrative of the new ethnic Buryat history for further consolidation of the Buryat ethnic identity and society, the ideologues of the Buryat national revival chose to forget events that could in any way compromise it in the eyes of the masses.

In the course of the recent Buryat ethnic revival, forgetting was clearly a defensive strategy provoked by repressed and humiliated memory. The most important problem of forgetting in this particular context is not just the resulting distortion of ethnic history, but a conscious refusal to study the historical experience of the relatively recent past. During the transition of the 1990s, when the Soviet-built centralized healthcare system nearly collapsed and the society was overwhelmed by growing social problems, such as alcoholism, prostitution, drug abuse, and moral decay, syphilis returned in Buryatia with new force. In my opinion, absence of the historical lessons learnt from the early Soviet campaign was one of the reasons why the return of the syphilis epidemic became possible. In addition, obliteration of that historical experience was among the reasons why the post-Soviet medics could not quickly contain it. Thus, the conscious denial of the “inconvenient” past as valuable historical experience constitutes a detrimental element of the hitherto reflexive defensive reaction of forgetting.