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‘They Are Just Humans’: Exiled Lama on Why Russia’s Buddhist Clergy Support the War

By Leyla Latypova

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Lama Baldan Bazarov. **Courtesy of Baldan Bazarov**

Lama Baldan Bazarov headed a Buddhist community in the mountainous Tunkinsky district in Russia’s Siberian republic of Buryatia for many years. His service to his native community had to come to an end when Moscow sent troops over the border with Ukraine in 2022.

Bazarov decided to leave Russia over his firm anti-war stance, becoming one of only a few Russian Buddhist clerks to condemn the invasion publicly.

The Moscow Times spoke with Bazarov, who is now living in exile in the United States, about his position on the war and why it is not shared by leading figures in Russia’s Buddhist Traditional Sangha.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

MT: How did you develop an anti-war view, and why did you decide to leave your homeland over it?

BB: I've held an anti-war position since childhood. At school, we were taught that there must be no war and that peace should reign in the world.

I have always rejected the policies implemented by Vladimir Putin and United Russia because they led to poverty. In recent years — starting with the annexation of Crimea — many ordinary people were dragged in to support growing anti-Ukrainian sentiment and policies. I knew this would lead to no good and defended Ukraine and Ukrainians in every argument that came up.

Since I was opposed to any aggression and the policies of Putin and United Russia even during those relatively easier times, when the war began, I realized I wouldn't be allowed to speak out at all. At the same time, I saw that more people around me were getting brainwashed by television and began to partake in this [anti-Ukrainian] rage. I decided to leave Russia immediately — and I left.

How is your life in the U.S. going?

It's more or less ok. I am working, I have a place to live in — that's the most important thing. The climate here in the U.S. is milder and warmer than back home in Buryatia, so I feel pretty comfortable.

I have been getting by by taking on any job that comes up. My first job was working at a construction site for a few days, then I worked at a hotel. After I got my driver's license, I started working in delivery.

I would now like to talk about those still in Russia...Damba Ayusheev, the 24th Khambo Lama of Russia and the head of Russia's Buddhist Traditional Sangha, expressed support for Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, as did many other members of the Sangha. Can you somehow explain their position? Doesn't it contradict the fundamental precepts of Buddhism?

This is absolutely correct. Of course, it directly contradicts the Buddhist precepts.

But I can understand Damba Ayusheev's position.

All Khambo Lamas swore an oath of loyalty to the Russian tsar during the imperial era. Without this, they could not be elected. During their election, they had to recite the pledge of allegiance [to the monarch].

When Damba Ayusheev was elected as the 24th Khambo Lama [in 1995], he also took an oath of loyalty to the head of the Russian state. He adheres to this oath because breaking it would not be honorable. Even in Buddhism, one must remain true to their promises and oaths.

As for the others, let's say no one explicitly told them: 'You must swear an oath of loyalty [to Putin].' No one made them take it. Support for the war is their own choice.

Do you know if there are Buddhist figures — perhaps some still in Russia — who do not hold a

pro-war position?

The most famous one is the [former] Supreme Lama of the republic of Kalmykia, Telo Tulku Rinpoche, who left the country.

Of course, there are many lamas who remain in their homeland with their followers and do not support the war but cannot speak out openly. They might express their position among their relatives, acquaintances, and believers, but they can't openly project it on a larger scale. There are quite a few lamas like this. And then there are those who, like me, left the country.

The Dalai Lama expressed hope for 'swift peace in Ukraine' at the very start of the war in February 2022. Why wasn't this sentiment reflected in the position of Russia's Buddhist Traditional Sangha?

The Russian denomination has its leader and all Buddhists follow their own leader. There are Buddhists in the republics of Tyva, Kalmykia and Buryatia. Each of the three Buddhist regions defines policies and relationships with secular authorities in its own way.

A vivid example is Kalmykia: the Supreme Lama was forced to leave the country due to his anti-war position, but other lamas remain there and they live according to the rules of the current authorities.

From this point of view, it's hard to criticize them because power can change hands and the clergy is forced to adapt to circumstances for the sake of their followers. They can't completely reject the status quo; they have to, to some extent, go along with it.

What can you say about the mood and opinions among Buddhist believers in Russia, particularly in Buryatia? How strongly does Ayusheev's position influence public sentiment?

I don't think Ayushev has a very strong influence, but those who support Putin find reassurance in his position.

Each person has their own free will and is free to make their own choice.

Some believers say: 'Buddha forbade violence — it's wrong, we cannot support it. But what can we do? Today, this is the country we live in, and we are forced to accept its actions.'

We have a saying that Buddhism relies on three pillars of support: faith in the Buddha, faith in the Buddha's teachings, and faith in the followers and students of the Buddha. The state that we live in, on the other hand, has four pillars of support, making it more stable.

Since the times of the Russian Empire, Buddhists in Russia have lived under constant pressure and this has left a lasting mark.

Even today, Russian Buddhist clergy argue that their forefathers also defended their homeland, both parishioners and the clergy fought in World War II.

But we must understand that those were different times.

Our clergy was subjected to repressions before World War II. All the datsans, temples and

monasteries were shut down. The most educated clergy were shot or exiled. People lived under intense pressure. So, when the lamas were called to fight, they couldn’t refuse.

Today there is complete freedom. You can choose who to listen to, what to watch, and make your own conclusions. I know that some people only watch the TV and don’t want to hear a different perspective. They only listen to people such as pro-Kremlin TV hosts Vladimir Solovyov and Olga Skabeyeva or RT head Margarita Simonyan. They are under the spell of their rhetoric. It's clear.

As I understand, not all Buddhist leaders could resist that spell either.

Yes, of course. The clergy are just humans.

They essentially don’t differ from others, except in their knowledge of the Buddha's teachings and their desire to understand them. In some cases, they follow the teachings of the Buddha, and in other cases, they let themselves slip.

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