

Andrei Znamenski

*Red Shambhala: Magic, Prophecy and Geopolitics in the Heart of Asia*  
(Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 2011, 257pp.)

*Red Shambhala* is a lively historical account of Soviet geopolitics in Central Asia in the first decade of the Communist government. Znamenski tells the story through portraits of key protagonists, drawing on newly opened archives in Russia and new Russian publications. Znamenski, who now teaches in the USA, studied in Russia and has written earlier on shamanism in Siberia, home to many of the people discussed in *Red Shambhala*.

During what is called in Russia, the 'Silver Age' (1890-1914) there was an interest in Asian philosophy, in the folklore and beliefs of the peoples of Central Asia who had newly been incorporated into the Russian Empire in the 1870s. Along with this interest in Asian thought, there were links to spiritual and esoteric movements in Western Europe. This period is well described by Gary Lachman in his biography *In Search of P. D. Ouspensky* also published by Quest Books. Ouspensky was an important contributor to this current. Along with revolutionary politics, there was an interest in thought transference, in psychic research of all kinds, of prolonging life and of contacts with the spirit world.

The Silver Age ended with the start of the First World War followed by the 1917 revolutions. Many of those with spiritual interests, such as Ouspensky and Gurdjueff, left Russia during the early years of the revolutionary period (1917-1923). However, others stayed. Some because they could not get out; others because they believed in the aims of the Revolution and wanted to help build a new society. Some, such as the novelist Maxim Gorkey who believed that humans could evolve into 'Absolute Spirit' and so influence the development of the universe, were given positions of importance. A Commissariat of Enlightenment was created for a while within the government. ( See John Gray's recent *The Immortalization Commission* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011). Others were more obscure and had to struggle to get people interested in their ideas. Znamenski brings to life Alexander Barchenko (1881-1938) whose interest in finding Shambhala is at the center of this book.

The Shambhala myth developed in India around the year 1000 AD and is related to the *Kalachakra Tantra* (The Wheel of Time). Part of the Shambhala myth is written as a detailed prophecy about the future — basically the period 1000-2000. The first phase of history was to be a period of decline when teachings of the Buddha would be overrun and his followers dispersed. The true teachings would then only be found in Shambhala, a secret land guarded by high mountains with an all-wise king who would occasionally send out messengers into the outer world with teachings or to provide help to seekers.

Toward the end of the period covered by the Kalachakra, thus some time shortly before the year 2000, in a time of troubles, the King of Shambhala, Rigden Djapo, would come from Shambhala with an army, defeat evil and a time of love, compassion, joy and equality would begin.

The first part of the prophecy came true as Islamic armies conquered India and the Kalachakra teachings disappeared. The Shambhala myth moved to Tibet and Mongolia which was religiously in close contact with Tibet. The original Kalachakra texts did not survive. What we have today are the Tibetan translations and techniques of meditations, mantras and visualizations of deities. Part of the Kalachakra ceremonies, considered 'initiations' as there is

a transfer of energies, are given now yearly by the Dalai Lama who considers them most appropriate for this time of transition. Other aspects of the Kalachakra are reserved for those who are trained to receive them.

Thus the Shambhala myth was contained within a larger body of teachings and practices. However, the 'secret kingdom' and the final battle were ideas that were woven into other Tibetan and Mongol prophecies of the warrior who would come in a sort of Armageddon battle against worn-out ways and worn-out values. Geser Khan was also such a hero among Buryat, Mongols and Tibetans. Storytellers merged the character of Geser with the image of the Shambhala King as well as with the image of Maitreya who would be the next Buddha.

Tibetan teachings and the Shambhala myth entered Russian intellectual life through Agvan Dorzhiev (1858-1938), a high lama who had been the chief tutor of the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama and who was sent as an Ambassador to the court of the Russian Tsar. Dorzhiev hoped that the Tsar would become a protector of Buddhism and help in the creation of a pan-Buddhist state under Russian protection. He had built a Tibetan-style temple in St. Petersburg. Its windows were designed by Nicholas Roerich (1874-1947) who frequented the discussions in the Temple.

The 1911 end of the Chinese Empire and the start of a Republican government largely ended Chinese control over Tibet and most of Mongolia. As Znamenski writes "Six years later, the same fate befell the Russian Empire. The chaos, civil wars, violence and banditry that followed the demise of these two giants activated Mongol-Tibetan prophecies that helped people get through tough times." The end of Chinese rule in Tibet led to a heightened conflict between the highly activist 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama who fled Tibet in 1923 to live at the edge of Mongolia. He never returned to Tibet. The Mongols welcomed the Panchen Lama as their spiritual leaders, especially after the spiritual-political head of Mongolia, the Bogdo-gegen died in 1924, and the Soviets prevented his replacement. (For a good account of this period in Tibet see Melvyn Goldstein *A History of Modern Tibet 1913-1951* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989)

Alexander Barchenko, who Znamenski compares to a Red Merlin wishing to enlighten a Stalin in the role of King Arthur, had echoes of the Shambhala myth in his explorations of thought transfer, psychic energy and secret knowledge. On the eve of the First World War, he had published two popular novels about a Dr Chernii, member of a secret order with headquarters in the foothills of Tibet who used paranormal effects for the public good.

With the coming of the Soviets to power, Barchenko began contemplating how to ennoble the Communist project by using the ancient science hidden in Inner Asia. As he said in his 'confession' to the secret police just before they killed him in 1938 "The contact with Shambhala is capable of pulling humankind out of the bloody deadlock of insanity — the violent struggle in which people hopelessly drowned themselves."

While Stalin put an end to any thoughts outside his narrowly defined 'Party line' by the mid -1930s, the 1920s were still a period when a range of views was possible — at least in private. Barchenko, through person contacts, got in touch with Gleb Bokii (1879-1937) an early revolutionary become chief of the Special Section in charge of code work of the political police. Bokii had interests in esoteric subjects, used mediums to try to get information that he

could not get from other sources, and especially had money for which he did not have to account.

Bokii had access to Georgy Chicherin, the Commissar for Foreign Affairs, a skilled diplomat who had an important diplomatic career under the Czar. Chicherin, by the mid-1920s, was convinced that there was little hope for the Soviet Union to improve relations with Western Europe and thus efforts should be made toward Mongolia, China, Tibet and so weaken British influence in India — a continuation of the ‘Great Game’. (See Karl Meyer and Shareen Brysac *Tournament of Shadows: The Great Game and the Race for Empire in Central Asia*. (New York: Basic Books, 2006)

Although Chicherin did not believe in hidden kingdoms and secret knowledge, he was willing to finance several expeditions toward Tibet. He also wanted to see about the possible return to Tibet of the Panchen Lama whose activities in Mongolia worried him. These expeditions to Tibet, and Chicherin’s policies toward Mongolia are recounted in detail. Chicherin’s hopes to control Mongolia and to use Mongols to win over the Dalai Lama in Tibet fell through. By the mid-1920s, Agvan Dorzhiev, the Tibetan Ambassador realized that he was being used by the Soviets. He started to play a double game. While pretending to be loyal to the Bolsheviks and wanting to help them, he would send messengers to Lhasa to warn the Dalai Lama as to what was going on in Russia. Tibet never became a base for anti-British activity in India, and no secret cities were found.

Znamenski ends his book with a long section on Nicholas Roerich, his wife Helena (1879-1955) and older son George (1902-1960). Nicholas Roerich had also heard of the Shambhala myth from Agvan Dorzhiev in St. Petersburg. Roerich and Helena were living in Finland (then part of the Russian Empire) when the revolution broke out. Finland was less directly touched by the post-Revolution civil war, but the Roerichs saw the dangers ahead and left for Europe and the USA. Roerich, who was interested in Russian and Nordic myths, believed that myths often contained a part of historic fact. Thus the Shambhala idea of a hidden area with deep spiritual knowledge might have an element of truth. Both Roerichs were theosophists and believed that there were masters of wisdom who had influence in the world and would provide teachings to those that needed it. Helena, in particular, believed that she received by thought transfer messages from a Master Morya — these messages becoming the base for the Agni Yoga books. The idea that there were more such masters living together in one spot, Shambhala, was a real possibility.

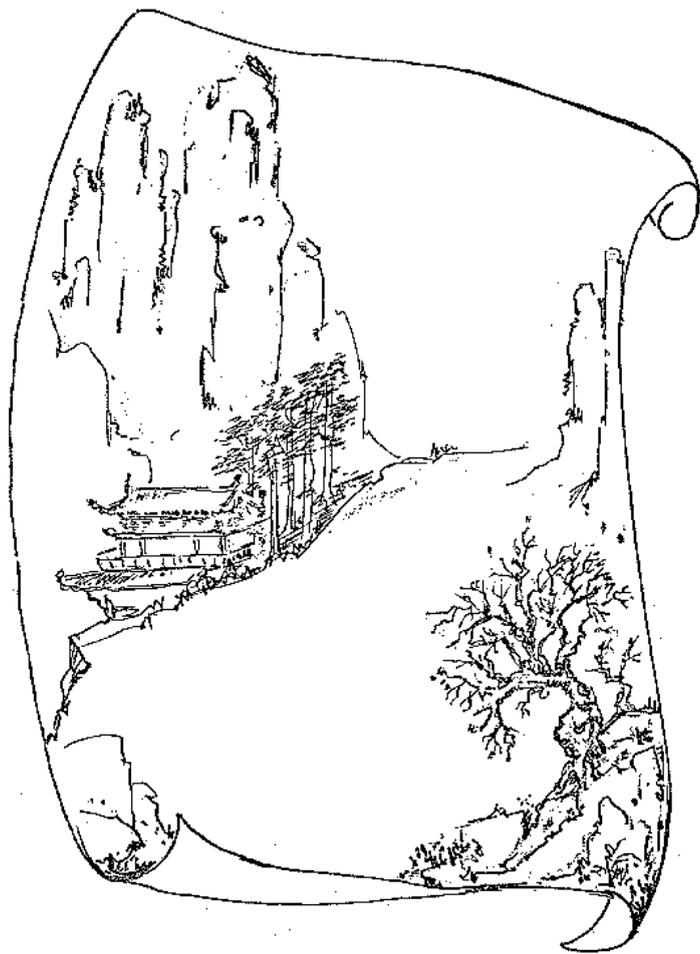
Related to the idea that there was a physical place, Shambhala, there was also the Shambhala prophecy of a time of trial followed by the start of a new age. The Panchan Lama was to play a role in this prophecy and so his flight to Mongolia was a sign. Twice, Nicholas Roerich and George who had been trained in the US and France as a scholar of Tibet and its culture made efforts to reach Tibet and to find a physical Shambhala. The first and longer effort in which Helena also participated is described with personal reflections in two books of Nicholas Roerich *Altai-Himalaya* and *Shambhala* while George Roerich sets out the difficulties encountered in *Trails to Inmost Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1931). The second effort under the sponsorship of Henry Wallace, then FDR’s Secretary of Agriculture, went even less well.

There may also have been some political vision behind these efforts of Roerich. Znamenski draws upon some recent books and articles in Russian which have not yet been translated. Roerich’s unpublished writings and papers were donated by his younger son

Svetoslav to a specially-created Roerich Foundation in Moscow and now serve as a basis for new writings on his efforts. How serious his views on creating a separate Buddhist Mongol-Tibetan state under the leadership of the Panchan Lama were, I have no idea. Roerich continued in this Central Asian travels to make drawings which he later transformed into some of his best-known paintings. From his travels, he came to have a low opinion of Tibetan Buddhism as it existed. If there were a Shambhala, there were no messengers being sent to enlighten Buddhist monestaries.

Since the 1960s and the interest in Tibetan Buddhism sparked by the exile of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, the Shambhala myth has been internalized. The secret city of knowledge is the heart; the battle against evil is a battle against inner weaknesses; the masters are those within our own reasoning. This may have always been the essence of the Shambhala story: the kingdom of knowledge is within.

Rene Wadlow



Drawing: Cecile Wadlow