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Author(s)	Inoue, Takehiko
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Dittmar Schorkowitz, *Echoes from Russia's Colonial Past: The Pre-revolutionary Files of the Kalmyk National Archive* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2023), 3 vols., CXIII+1812 pp.

This monumental work could fundamentally change our engagement with the archives in the study of the Russian Empire. At first glance, Dittmar Schorkowitz's three-volume publication appears to be a reference work: a meticulously compiled inventory of archival holdings from the National Archive of the Republic of Kalmykia. Nevertheless, such a characterization would be misleading. What this substantial work ultimately offers is not simply access to archival materials, but an epistemological critique of the archive itself. It invites us to reconsider the archive not as a neutral repository of historical truth, but as a political and conceptual site structured as much by absence as by presence.

The three volumes present a comprehensive inventory of pre-revolutionary archival materials preserved in Kalmykia, covering the early seventeenth century to the 1930s. The core of the work consists of forty-nine *fond*s (numbered I-1 to I-49), arranged chronologically and supplemented by additional materials from later fonds that contain pre-revolutionary files. These include records of the central Kalmyk administration, local *ulus* authorities, and judicial institutions, and the Lamaistic Clerical Administration, as well as documentation relating to military service, economic activity, and relations with neighboring regions. The work thus serves as an indispensable guide to the administrative, social, and religious history of the Kalmyk steppe within the Russian Empire.

Recent scholarship has emphasized that archives are neither neutral nor complete. As Ann Laura Stoler has argued, colonial archives must be read "along the archival grain," attending to their inconsistencies, fragmentations, and silences rather than treating them as transparent sources.[1] Schorkowitz's work can be situated within this analytical shift. However, it goes a step further. Rather than focusing on reading silences within surviving documents, it attempts to reconstruct them. By recovering the titles of lost files from primary record books and inspection lists, the work turns archival absence into a structured object of historical analysis.

The scale of loss documented in this work is striking. Through a systematic comparison of primary record books and current archival holdings, Schorkowitz shows that nearly half of the original files have disappeared. These losses were not the result of a single rupture but of overlapping processes: administrative disposal (so-called *makulatura* campaigns, i.e., the systematic removal of "outdated" files), wartime destruction, the deportation of the Kalmyk population in 1943, and politically motivated purges of "inconvenient" materials. In this sense, the archival gaps constitute a legacy of the political transformation, reflecting shifting priorities of imperial and Soviet rule.

This perspective resonates with the recent debates on the Russian Empire as a colonial formation. It also recalls Alexander Etkind's notion of "internal colonization,"[2] though Schorkowitz shifts the emphasis from the production of colonial knowledge

1 Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009).

2 Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).

to the disappearance of its traces. Similarly, as Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper have argued, empires governed through the management of differences, producing categories and legal distinctions that structured imperial rule.[3] Archival practices were central to this process. They did not simply record reality but actively constituted it. Schorkowitz adds that imperial power operated not only through the production of knowledge but also through its destruction.

The reconstruction of titles from lost files is not merely a formal exercise. It clarifies the mechanisms through which the archival record was shaped. Rather than reconstructing a complete picture of the Kalmyk society, Schorkowitz shows how particular domains were disproportionately removed from the archive. Materials relating to socio-economic life, local administration, and especially religion were affected by administrative disposal, political repression, and ideological reconfiguration. In this respect, what he described as archival silencing reflects the priorities of imperial and Soviet governance rather than accidental loss.

This point is particularly clear in relation to Buddhist institutions. Materials concerning the Lamaistic Clerical Administration and broader networks of Tibetan Buddhism have suffered disproportionate losses. While previous studies, including those of Nikolay Tsyrempilov, have shown how Buddhist institutions were incorporated into imperial structures,[4] Schorkowitz demonstrates how the archival traces of these processes were later reduced or removed. The limited survival of documentation on Buddhism does not indicate its marginality but reflects anti-religious campaigns and the Soviet effort to reshape Kalmyk identity after the 1943 deportation.

One of the most notable aspects of this work is its combination of analytical concerns with long-term engagement. Schorkowitz's access to the primary record books was made possible through sustained cooperation with local archival staff since the 1990s. This highlights that historical knowledge depends not only on theory but also on continued collaboration with local institutions. At the same time, presenting the material in accessible form to Russian readers suggests an awareness of the need to return reconstructed knowledge to the communities from which it was derived.

At its core, this work raises a methodological problem. As Schorkowitz notes, "it is the surviving amount of documentation that shapes our understanding and interpretation of historical process" (p. CX), while the loss of a substantial part of the archive means that knowledge remains partial. The Kalmyk archive thus appears not simply as a collection of documents, but as a structure shaped by loss, fragmentation, and selective preservation. To work with such an archive is to recognize the limits of what can be known and to treat absence itself as a subject of historical analysis.

By making absence visible, *Echoes from Russia's Colonial Past* not only enriches our understanding of the Kalmyk past but also offers a powerful and highly original model for rethinking the relationship between archives, power, and historical knowledge in the study of the empire.

Takehiko Inoue

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3 Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011).

4 For example, see: Nikolay Tsyrempilov, *Under the Shadow of White Tara: Buriat Buddhists in Imperial Russia* (Leiden: Brill/Ferdinand Schöningh, 2021).