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*Buddha's Warriors: The Story of the CIA-Backed Tibetan  
Freedom Fighters, the Chinese Communist Invasion, and  
the Ultimate Fall of Tibet*

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# A Review of *Buddha's Warriors: The Story of the CIA-Backed Tibetan Freedom Fighters, the Chinese Communist Invasion, and the Ultimate Fall of Tibet*

Vibha Arora \*

*Buddha's Warriors: The Story of the CIA-Backed Tibetan Freedom Fighters, the Chinese Communist Invasion, and the Ultimate Fall of Tibet.* By Mikel Dunham. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher & Penguin, 2004, 448 pages, ISBN 1-58542-348-3, US \$29.95.

Mikel Dunham's *Buddha's Warriors* is not a *Shangri-La* story about Tibet, but a sensitive historical account of the valiant warrior Khampas armed resistance to Chinese colonialism: a tribute to Tibet's freedom fighters. This heart-rending and gripping account is based on interviews of persons who actively participated in the armed resistance in Kham and are now living in refugee camps and settlements in India and Nepal.

The fierce, independent, and intimidating Khampa brigands are anything but the gentle stereotyped image of a peace-loving religious Tibetan group, nevertheless "To be a Khampa was [is] to be a Tibetan Buddhist" and whole monasteries in Kham armed themselves and waged war against the Chinese forcible occupation of Tibet (pp. 8, 10). The Bhutias among whom this reviewer conducted research in Sikkim migrated from Kham to Sikkim in the fourteenth century; they are Khampas. During my own fieldwork in Sikkim I inadvertently heard stories of Tibetan resistance, the flight of the Tibetans in 1959, and their subsequent settlement into Sikkim as refugees. These stories prompted me to compare the fate of Tibet with that of the Buddhist kingdom of Sikkim, which became an Indian state in 1975 (see Vibha Arora,

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“Changes in the Perception of Tibetan Identities in Contemporary Sikkim, India,” in *Tibetan Borderlands*, edited by Christian Klieger, 31–52 [Leiden: Brill, 2006]; and Vibha Arora, “The Roots and the Route of Secularism in Sikkim,” in *Economic and Political Weekly* 16: 38 [2006], 4063–71). In 2005, China officially acknowledged Sikkim as part of India, and during the Chinese Premier’s visit the Tibetans vociferously protested. It has taken more than forty-four years for Sino-Indian internal trade to be resumed through the Nathula pass of Sikkim. Yet the solution to the Tibet problem has not been found. Will Tibet ever become free?

The loss of Tibet is epic and monumental. Despite prima facie evidence of genocide in Tibet, economic interests between Western nations and China have precluded any strategic criticism or questioning of this totalitarian occupation and monumental violation of human rights. During the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, nearly 95 percent of the monasteries and temples of Tibet were razed to the ground and about 1.2 million Tibetans died. There are now over 7.5 million Chinese in Tibet compared with an indigenous population of 6 million (p. 6). What led to this sordid state of affairs? Did the Tibetan government and people oppose the Chinese annexation? What was the reaction of the international community to the Tibet issue? Organized into eight chapters with an epilogue, this enthralling book seeks to provide us with a historical account of the events and negotiations leading up to the annexation of Tibet, the flight of the Dalai Lama in 1959, as well as the lesser-known resistance in Eastern Tibet.

The book begins by giving us insights into the history and functioning of the Tibetan religious polity, the history and geography of Kham, and the Khampa psyche and lifestyle—along with biographical sketches of the key men who participated and led the CIA-backed Khampa armed resistance. Aptly titled “Leopard Cubs,” the first chapter introduces General Gonpo Tashi, Athar Lithang, Kalsang Gyatotsang, and Wangdu Gyatotsang; the men who formed the core of Khampa resistance. The second chapter describes the Chinese occupation of Eastern Tibet in 1950 and the weak and strategi-

cally damaging response of the Tibetan government of Lhasa to this invasion. The third chapter narrates the ineffective efforts of Tibet to get international support for their cause, the shunning response of the United Nations, India, Great Britain, the US and other countries to the Tibetan appeal, the complicity of some members of the Tibetan nobility, and the tragic events leading to the Dalai Lama's acceptance of the May 1951 17-point Agreement with China that recognized the suzerainty of China over Tibet. The fourth and fifth chapters discuss the treacherous manner in which the Chinese overpowered the Tibetans, neutralized Tibet's Kashag (Cabinet) while following a policy of "divide and conquer" with the Panchen Lama and the Dalai Lama, and provide strong evidence of Tibetan resistance not merely in Lhasa but on the part of armed rebels in Amdo, Golok and Kham in Eastern Tibet.

The non-violent Buddhist monks of Eastern Tibet rose as warriors and defenders of the Buddhist faith, taking on the responsibility to check the Chinese plunder and destruction of their monasteries, religious scriptures, sacred objects and art. According to Dunham, history now recognizes Indian Prime Minister's J. L. Nehru's monumental error in ignoring Tibet's pleas and recognizing Tibet as a legitimate part of China, as well as his being seduced into signing the Sino-Indian Panchsheel agreement of 1953. The revolting brutality and inhuman torture of Tibetan men, lamas and monks, the rape of women and nuns, and the killing of innocent children by the Chinese, is sordidly described and detailed in these pages. As Dunham writes: "The horrors went on and on. The Han Chinese introduced whole new worlds of cruelty. And there was no one to stop them. If there was hell on earth it was in Eastern Tibet in 1956" (p. 168). Recognizing the importance of Tibet in checking communism and being humanely concerned about the people of Tibet, the American government decided to indirectly and secretly support the Tibetan cause through the CIA. The sixth chapter explains the charismatic and valiant Gompo Tashi's efforts to gather necessary funds and equipment and inspire, organize and rally an army of Tibetans freedom fighters under the banner of Chushi Gangdruk ("land of four

rivers and six ranges,” i.e., Kham) to fight the Chinese People’s Liberation Army. In 1957, Roger E. McCarthy of the CIA trained select six Khampas into the ways of modern guerrilla warfare so that they could give strategic leadership and organize the armed resistance in Kham, Amdo and Golok. One of the biggest problems the Tibetan freedom fighters faced was the complete absence of any modern communications network, making coordination of resistance extremely difficult. As Athar, who was trained by the CIA, states, “With American airplanes supporting us, it felt like we really had a chance” (p. 246). Tibetan expatriates residing in Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Sikkim played a critical role in disseminating news about the Chinese atrocities in Tibet, gathering international support for Tibet, and logistically supporting Tibetan resistance.

“Buddha’s warriors” fought valiantly to the death but ultimately lost to the military superiority of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA). Dunham’s graphic description of the carnage and violence inflicted by the PLA on the Tibetan population transports the reader into the streets of Lhasa and the “impregnable” mountain bastions of Kham: and yet, “the violation of Tibet was complete” (p. 298). The odds were levelled against Tibet. Rendered powerless, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama’s escape into exile in India in 1959 was seen as the only way to sustain the cause of the Tibetan people. This historic escape of the 23-year old Dalai Lama was not in fact engineered by the CIA but is attributed by Dunham to the ingenuity of a few select Tibetans (p. 289).

In chapters nine and ten, Dunham describes the reaction of people around the world to the annexation of Tibet, the CIA-sponsored armed resistance in Tibet and Nepal, and the Dalai Lama’s sustained non-violent efforts to get sympathy and support for a free Tibet. As the Chinese atrocities multiplied and destroyed nearly all Buddhist monasteries, many Tibetans fled to India and Nepal. It was genocide, plain and simple, as only a few thousand Tibetans escaped Tibet and survived the journey into the exile and life in the refugee camps: “there were no great victories to be recorded, *but the disrupt-*

*tions the Khampas created allowed untold thousands of Tibetans to make their way safely to the border—a major contribution overlooked by Western scholars” (p. 341, emphasis added).*

The cause of a free Tibet has taken deep roots in the international arena under the charismatic leadership of the 14th Dalai Lama (who was himself born in Amdo, Eastern Tibet). This scintillating and lucidly written account is enlivened by numerous photographs that together provide us with knowledge about the processes and events culminating in one of the greatest horrors of modern times: the ethnic genocide of the Tibetan population and the Chinese attempts to efface Tibet’s rich culture, religious heritage, and political integrity. Mikel Dunham has done a commendable job and his book is an important contribution to scholarship on the history and culture of Tibet and Central Asia, as well as international politics.