

THE SOVIETS IN XINJIANG

1911-1949

by Mark Dickens

INTRODUCTION

Xinjiang¹ is a large region² in northwest China which consists of two basins which are surrounded by mountains on three sides. The Jungarian Basin³ lies south of the Altai mountains and north of the Tien Shan (Heavenly Mountains). This latter range in turn provides the northern and western boundaries for the massive Tarim Basin, most of which is covered by the Taklamakan Desert. This basin is bounded to the southeast by the Pamir and Karakoram ranges and to the southwest by the Himalayas. The Taklamakan stretches into the western reaches of the Gobi desert to the east. As part of the People's Republic of China, the official name of the region today is the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region.

The area has long played a key role in Asian history, although it is a little known part of the world. Its location in the middle of the Asian continent has resulted in a succession of conquerors and traders passing through the area over the last two millenia. For much of that time, it has lain within the Chinese sphere of influence. However, since the expansion of the Tsarist Empire into Central Asia in the nineteenth century, it has become one of a number of areas in Asia where the Chinese and the Russians have competed for the allegiance of the local inhabitants. This paper will examine the influence of the Russians, mostly during the Soviet regime, in Xinjiang during the Chinese Republican era (1911-1949).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND⁴

The earliest historical records that we have of Xinjiang portray the area as the staging ground for the raids of various Central Asian barbarians into neighbouring areas, especially the Chinese Empire. China was obviously concerned to protect her civilization from these intruders and sought to do so through the time-honored method

¹ Xinjiang, which means "New Territory" in Chinese, is the present name for the area which was known previously in the West as Eastern or Chinese Turkestan. In literature which does not use the Pinyin system of Romanization, it often appears as Sinkiang. This name has been used by the Chinese to describe the area ever since it first came under Chinese rule during the Han dynasty, but it is not the name that the native inhabitants use to refer to their homeland. However, it will be used in this paper for the sake of consistency, since it is the name that was used during the time period that this paper is concerned with.

² 1,650,000 km² (637,000 sq. mi.).

³ Also spelled Zungharian, Dzungarian, or Dzhungarian..

⁴ For a more indepth account of the pre-Republican history of Xinjiang, see Jack Chen, *The Sinkiang Story*, (New York: MacMillan, 1977), 3-161.

of "using barbarians to control barbarians." The first Chinese venture into Central Asia was made during the Han dynasty (206 BC-AD 220), when a diplomatic mission was sent out by the Han emperor Wudi⁵ (140-86 BC) in 138 BC to the Ferghana Valley (in present-day Soviet Central Asia), under the leadership of Zhang Qian.⁶ In 121 BC, the emperor's forces defeated the Xiong-nu⁷ (a term which may refer to the people we know as the Huns), a powerful Central Asian tribal confederation which had dominated Central Asia since about 200 BC.

Diplomatic ties between the Chinese and the Persians were established shortly after, in 106 BC. This significant event was followed in 102 BC by the capture of the city of Kokand in the Ferghana Valley by the Chinese. As a result of this extension of Chinese military and political power into Central Asia, it soon became possible for traders to pass safely between the Persian and the Chinese Empires and so arose one of the most famous trade routes in history: the Silk Road. A significant portion of this route passed through Central Asia. Thus, Chinese control of Xinjiang fulfilled the dual role of providing a protective buffer zone from marauding raiders and ensuring the continuance of the lucrative commercial trade with the West.

Not surprisingly, Chinese control in the border areas depended to a large extent upon the relative strength of the ruling dynasty. Thus, "Chinese hegemony in eastern Central Asia waxed and waned throughout the following centuries... and the frontiers remained unstable. Indigenous states periodically arose and threw off Chinese suzerainty, and the Imperial power ebbed and flowed according to the strength of the throne."⁸ In AD 97, under General Pan Ch'ao, Chinese armies reached the Caspian Sea. However, as the Han dynasty declined in power, finally coming to an end in AD 220, a new power rose in Central Asia. The nomadic Turks, streaming out of their homeland in Mongolia and southern Siberia, began to move into the area. In 552, a Turkic Empire (or Khaganate) was founded which soon stretched from the borders of China proper to those of the Byzantine Empire. After regaining her strength, China, now ruled by the Tang dynasty (618-906), once again moved west under emperor Li Shi-min, capturing the cities of Kucha, Khotan, Kashgar, Yarkand, and Turfan (all in modern-day Xinjiang) between 630 and 640 and penetrating as far west as Bukhara and Samarkand in 659. Meanwhile, the area to the north, centered on

⁵ Or Wu-ti. Wherever possible, the Pinyin system of Romanizing Chinese names is used in the text, and the Wade-Giles rendering is indicated in a footnote, unless the former could not be found, in which case, the latter is used in the text. The Romanization system used by sources consulted is retained in those passages quoted.

⁶ Or Chang Ch'ien.

⁷ Or Hsiung-nu.

⁸ Donald H. McMillen, *Chinese Communist Power and Policy in Xinjiang, 1949-1977* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1979), 15.

Mongolia, came under the control of a series of Turkic empires, including the Turks again (in 683), the Uighurs (in 745), and the Kirghiz (in 840).

Chinese rule in the area was again challenged in the eighth century by the Arab armies which swept into Central Asia to spread the new faith of Islam. The Arab general Qutaiba ibn Muslim had crossed the Oxus River in 711, capturing Bukhara in that same year and Samarkand the next year. In 713 Arab armies penetrated into Xinjiang and sacked Kashgar. Chinese power in Central Asia was decisively crushed by the Arabs in 751 at the Battle of Talas, northeast of Tashkent. The armies of the Middle Kingdom once again retreated behind the Great Wall. Soon after, the Uighurs, fleeing from the Kirghiz in Mongolia, set up a kingdom in the Tarim Basin which was to last from about 850 until the Mongol conquest in the thirteenth century. Xinjiang gradually came under the influence of Islam and most of the Uighurs adopted Islam under Abdulkерim Satuk Bughra Khan, the ruler of Kashgar, who became a Muslim in 934. Three centuries later, both the Arab and the Chinese Empires were conquered by the Mongols. Baghdad, the Arab capital, was captured in 1258, and the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1260-1368) was established in China two years later. Xinjiang was given to Chagatay, one of Chingiz Khan's sons, as his territorial allotment.

Although emperors during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) received tribute from various kingdoms in Central Asia, including Khotan, Samarkand, and Bukhara, Chinese military control of Xinjiang was not re-established until the late seventeenth century, under the Manchu Qing dynasty (1644-1911). The reconquest began under the Kangxi⁹ emperor in the 1690s. By 1759, during the reign of the Qianlong¹⁰ emperor, the entire Tarim basin had been subjugated. "In 1768, the area formerly designated as 'Chinese Turkestan' was renamed Xinjiang, thus denoting Peking's intention of incorporating the region in perpetuity as the 'new territory' of China."¹¹ At the same time, the Chinese borders were extended beyond the Tien Shan into the Kazakh steppe, as far as Lake Balkash, as a result of the defeat of the Mongol Jungars in 1757. In 1771, the Qing dynasty unsuccessfully sought to bring the khan of the Kazakh Great Horde into a vassal relationship to the emperor. Thus, China's westward expansion stopped. The great distance of Xinjiang from the imperial Chinese capital resulted in a situation in which the local government representatives, both Manchu and Chinese, "enjoyed a large measure of autonomy and virtually ran the region according to their own devices,"¹² a situation which, as we shall see, was also prevalent during the Republican era.

⁹ Or K'ang-hsi.

¹⁰ Or Ch'ien-lung.

¹¹ McMillen, *Communist Power*, 17.

¹² McMillen, *Communist Power*, 17.

The isolation of the area also made it susceptible to both internal unrest and external interference, both of which threatened Chinese control. Internal disturbances came in the form of frequent Muslim rebellions, often in the form of a "holy war" against the "infidels." One such insurrection, the Aqtaghlik rebellion, was led by Jahangir, an exiled pretender to the throne of Altishahr (as the Tarim Basin was then known), and lasted from 1820 to 1828, when he was captured and executed by the Chinese. Although these revolts were largely unsuccessful, they made the area less stable and therefore more vulnerable to external forces.

During the nineteenth century, two foreign powers were especially interested in Xinjiang: Imperial Russia and Britain. The Russians, after throwing off the Mongol yoke in 1480, had begun a rapid expansion eastward into Asia, in a relentless search for solid borders to protect the vast Eurasian steppe from a reoccurrence of the devastation which the armies of Chingiz Khan had unleashed. This eastward movement had resulted in the tsar's armies eventually occupying most of the area which had previously made up the Mongol Empire, except for Mongolia and China. There had been clashes between Russian and Chinese troops in Manchuria as early as the 1680s, culminating in the Treaty of Nerchinsk in 1689. The two empires had also come close to conflict in Central Asia in the eighteenth century as each advanced upon the Kazakhs from opposite sides, but contact had not been made at that time. By the latter half of the nineteenth century, however, the Tsar had extended his authority into what came to be known as Russian Turkestan, west of the Tien Shan range. This movement was perceived by the British as a potential threat to their interests in India. Thus, "The Great Game" between the two imperial powers was played out during much of the nineteenth century, especially in Persia and Afghanistan, as each attempted to carve out "buffer states" as a protection against the other.

Xinjiang too played a crucial role in the Game, located as it was between Russia and British India. Both powers soon became active in trading in the province, although the Manchus had imposed a ban on European trade in the area. According to a Soviet source, "the British, with their record in India, were the more dreaded of the two, and Peking lived in constant fear of intrigue in East Turkestan by these inveterate colonizers."¹³ However, despite British efforts, Russia eventually gained the upper hand in the area. As a result of a number of the "unequal treaties" which China was forced to sign with the Western powers after the Opium Wars, specifically the Ili Treaty (1851), the Tacheng Protocol of the Treaty of Peking (1860), and the Treaty of Tarbagatai (1864), China had to surrender nearly 350,000 square miles of territory to Russia, as well as giving the Russians special trading privileges and the right to

¹³ V.S. Kuznetsov, "British and Russian Trade in Sinkiang, 1819-1851," *Central Asian Review*, 13 (1965), 149. This article is an interesting account, from the Soviet perspective, of British and Russian trade in Xinjiang during the early nineteenth century.

station consuls in the area. At the same time, China suffered massive territorial losses to the Russians in Manchuria.

China's weakened state as a result of the Taiping Rebellion (1850-64), the second Opium War (1857-60), and Muslim Rebellions in Yunnan (1855-1873) and Shaanxi (1862-1873) set the stage for the next phase in the Game. Between 1864 and 1877, the Muslims in Xinjiang revolted and set up an independent state, which came to be known as "Kashgaria," under the leadership of the Kokand adventurer Yaqub Beg, who attempted to maintain good relations with both Britain and Russia, in hopes that they would be able to protect him against the inevitable Chinese attempt to once again bring the area and its inhabitants under the control of the Qing dynasty.¹⁴ Under these unstable conditions, the Russians proceeded to annex the Ili Valley in 1870-71, giving as their reason the need to maintain law and order in this area adjacent to their newly-conquered territory in Russian Turkestan. In 1877, Yaqub Beg was defeated by the Chinese general Zuo Zongtang. However, the "Ili Crisis" lasted until 1881, when the Treaty of St. Petersburg was signed, resulting in the return of most of the annexed territory to China, although Russia kept some of it and China had to pay indemnities to her and allow her to open up more consulates in the area.¹⁵

In 1884, Xinjiang officially became a province of China. "Until the Revolution of 1911, Xinjiang was ruled by generally able bureaucrats... and the Imperial government took an active interest in increasing, or at least maintaining, its control in the border region.... Despite the Imperial government's desire to maintain control over Xinjiang, however, the region nonetheless remained largely autonomous."¹⁶

XINJIANG UNDER YANG ZENGXIN¹⁷

¹⁴ For more detailed accounts of Xinjiang under Yaqub Beg, see V.G. Kiernan, "Kashgar and the Politics of Central Asia, 1868-1878," *The Cambridge Historical Journal*, 11 (1955), 317-342; K.B. Warikoo, "Chinese Turkestan During the Nineteenth Century: A Socio-Economic Study," *Central Asian Survey*, 4:3 (1985), 75-114. See also Gerald Morgan, "The Sino-Russian Border Dispute," *Contemporary Review*, 216:1252 (1970), 231-235, 245.

¹⁵ For more information on the Ili Crisis, see Immanuel C.Y. Hsu, *The Ili Crisis: A Study of Sino-Russian Diplomacy 1871-1881* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965) and Charles and Barbara Jelavich, ed. *Russia in the East 1876-1880: The Russo-Turkish War and the Kuldja Crisis As Seen Through the Letters of A.G. Jomini to N.K. Giers* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1959).

¹⁶ McMillen, *Communist Power*, 19. For more information on this period immediately preceding the Republican era, see C.P. Skrine, and Pamela Nightingale, *Macartney at Kashgar: New Light on British, Chinese and Russian Activities in Sinkiang, 1890-1918* (London: Methuen, 1973).

¹⁷ The material for the rest of this paper is largely taken from Andrew D.W. Forbes, *Warlords and Muslims in Chinese Central Asia: A Political History of Republican Sinkiang 1911-1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), the most up-to-date and thorough treatment of Republican Xinjiang. Most other sources dealing with this period were written much earlier, often by participants in the events described who either had access to only a limited amount of documentation or who had political perspectives which colour their interpretation of the events described. In any event, Forbes uses all of these earlier sources, as well as many others, in his attempt to put together as objective an account as possible. The following sources, although not consulted extensively for this paper, have been included in the bibliography for further reference:

Yang Zengxin¹⁸ entered the Chinese Civil Service in 1899 and was transferred to Xinjiang in 1908. With the downfall of the Manchu dynasty and the declaration of the Republic of China in 1911, the Qing governor of Xinjiang fled, leaving power in the hands of Yang, who was confirmed by President Yuan Shikai as the new Civil and Military Governor of Xinjiang. Yang's immediate task was to consolidate power in the province, a feat he was able to accomplish by 1914. However, in order to maintain his power, "he ruled as a complete autocrat, with all power gathered in his own hands"¹⁹ and gained a reputation for dealing ruthlessly with any opposition.

Characteristically suspicious of nearly everyone, he was especially concerned about his neighbour to the west: "Throughout his rule, Yang Tseng-hsin considered that the chief external threat to the survival of his regime lay across the western frontier, in Tsarist Russian (and later Soviet) Central Asia."²⁰ Indeed, in 1912, when there was a disturbance in Kashgar,²¹ Russian Cossack troops were sent over the border to help put it down. However, the danger of Russian territorial encroachment into China was not the only threat that Xinjiang's neighbour posed. There were also numerous movements amongst the Muslim peoples of Russian Turkestan, who are virtually identical in language and culture to the Turkic inhabitants of Xinjiang, which threatened to disrupt Chinese rule in the area if they spilled over the borders.²²

Most of these movements, which gained momentum after the 1917 Revolution, whether they were anti-Bolshevik, such as the Basmachi revolts, or Pro-Bolshevik, such as the Muslim Communists, were essentially pan-Islamic and pan-Turkic in nature and had as their goal the establishment of an independent Turkic Muslim state. At the same time, Soviet writers claim that the effect could work the other way also: "In the most backward regions the feudal-clerical elements and the bourgeois leaders [in Russian Turkestan], posing as 'friends of the people', attempted

Chen, *Sinkiang Story* (this source, written as it was shortly after the Cultural Revolution, has been significantly influenced by Chinese Communist propaganda); Owen Lattimore, *Pivot of Asia: Sinkiang and the Inner Asian Frontiers of China and Russia* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1950); Martin Norins, *Gateway to Asia: Sinkiang: Frontier of the Chinese Far West*. (New York: John Day, 1944).(this account, written towards the end of the Second World War, is concerned with the effect of events in Xinjiang upon the Allied war effort); C.P. Skrine, *Chinese Central Asia* (London: Methuen, 1971: reprint of 1926 edition) (the author was the British Consul-General at Kashgar, 1922-24); Allen S. Whiting, and Sheng Shih-ts'ai. *Sinkiang: Pawn or Pivot?* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1958) (General Sheng's co-authorship of this work makes its objectivity questionable); Aitchen K.Wu, *Turkistan Tumult* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1984: reprint of 1940 edition)(the author was a representative of the Guomindang in Xinjiang, 1932-33).

¹⁸ Or, Yang Tseng-hsin.

¹⁹ Forbes, *Warlords*, 14.

²⁰ *ibid*, 16.

²¹ The Chinese name for Kashgar is Kashi.

²² For a Soviet perspective on the revolutionary influence that residents of Russian Turkestan and Xinjiang had on each other prior to 1917, see "Relations Between Turkestan and Sinkiang 1900-1917," *Central Asian Review*, 12 (1964), 315-322, which was written "at a time when the friendship of the Soviet Union with the peoples of the East goes from strength to strength" (315).

to rouse the populace to Holy War and to tear Central Asia and Kazakhstan from Russia. The foreign agents (of Great Britain, Germany and Turkey) backed this endeavour and Sinkiang became a seat of operations.... There were those among the Sinkiang bourgeoisie, feudal nobility and reactionary clergy who were Panislam and Pan-Turk-minded, and from these the Turkish and German Intelligence recruited its agents to introduce subversion into the Turkestan Kray [Administrative unit]."²³

After the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, Soviet influence in Xinjiang proceeded slowly at first. The Soviets were granted special trading rights in the Ili Valley and permission to have representatives in Kulja.²⁴ At the same time, numerous Muslims, especially businessmen, took advantage of the opportunity to travel to the Soviet Union.²⁵ As one British official noted, "Their sons, even if educated at home, eventually come to learn Russian, and are much in contact with the ideas of Bolshevism as understood in Tashkent."²⁶ C.P. Skrine, the British Consul-General in Kashgar (1922-24) wrote to his superiors in New Delhi, "Not only in Ili, but also to a less [sic] extent in the south, the Soviet Government is doing what it can by means of an insidious propaganda to awaken the race- and class-consciousness of the Muhammadan population,"²⁷ a policy which caused Yang to respond with even more censorship and repression of rights.

Soviet influence at this time was strongest in the north, especially in the Ili Valley, what with its long history of Russian ties. The British, on the other hand, had their chief sphere of influence in the south, particularly in Kashgar, where the British Consulate was located. Here, especially under the leadership of Col. P.T. Etherton, British Consul-General from 1918 to 1922, British agents continued to operate in their efforts to halt Bolshevik plans to "set the East ablaze" by exporting the Revolution to the countries of Asia, chiefly British India, that bastion of "Capitalist Imperialism."²⁸ Up until 1924, the Soviets did not have normal diplomatic relations with the Chinese Nationalist government and so they had no official representatives in Xinjiang. Yang, "who correctly perceived that British policy in Sinkiang aimed at excluding Soviet influence by encouraging the survival of (his own) stable Chinese administration, was content to permit Etherton and his successors the exercise of considerable political influence to the south of the T'ien Shan."²⁹

²³ "Relations," 320.

²⁴ The Chinese name for Kulja is Yining.

²⁵ Many of these stayed in Soviet Turkestan and today there are still large numbers of Uighurs (about 211,000) and Dungans (about 52,000) living in the Soviet Central Asian republics.

²⁶ Forbes, *Warlords*, 19.

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ For an account of the role that Etherton and others played in this new chapter of the Great Game, see Peter Hopkirk, *Setting the East Ablaze: Lenin's Dream of an Empire in Asia* (London: John Murray, 1984).

²⁹ Forbes, *Warlords*, 63.

However, the Sino-Soviet agreement of 1924, re-establishing formal relations between the two powers, changed this situation. Soviet Consulates were established in the provincial capital, Urumchi,³⁰ and in four other cities, including Kashgar, which soon became a scene of conflict between the Soviets, the British, and the Chinese. In an effort to limit their influence, the Chinese *Tao-yin* (local magistrate) imposed severe restrictions on the activities of the Soviets in Kashgar: "Censorship, already severe, was tightened still further.... Subsequently the freedom of the Soviet Consul to travel within southern Sinkiang was severely curtailed, and Kashgar citizens suspected of pro-Soviet sympathies became liable to the confiscation of their property and deportation to other oases."³¹ These measures helped to curb Soviet influence in the south, but that influence was continually growing stronger in the north.

At the same time, the Russians also played an indirect role in the gradual erosion of the Xinjiang economy, although the primary blame must be laid on Yang himself. Prior to the downfall of the Tsarist Empire, Russia had been Xinjiang's major trading partner. However, the combined effect of World War I, the Bolshevik Revolution, and the Civil War had resulted in a decline of trade which had seriously disrupted the economy of Xinjiang. At the same time, however, Yang "set about establishing an efficient machine for stripping the province of its assets.... a sophisticated system of economic checks was introduced to concentrate the wealth of the province in Yang's hands."³² Furthermore, Yang was extremely reluctant to pursue the much-needed industrialization of the region, fearing that the establishment of factories would provide breeding grounds for Communist ideas. All of these factors, coupled with the threat of Muslim revolt which always seemed to lie just below the surface, seriously threatened Yang's control of the province. However, revolt never broke out during his rule, which was prematurely ended when he was assassinated in July 1928, thus leaving the unstable condition in Xinjiang to his successor, Jin Shuren.³³

XINJIANG UNDER JIN SHUREN

Jin Shuren had accompanied Yang to Xinjiang in 1908 and had gradually risen in the Civil Service until he was the Provincial Commissioner for Civil Affairs. After Yang's assassination, he was recognized by the Guomindang (GMD) government in Nanjing as Provincial Chairman and Commander-in-Chief of the province, thus continuing the warlord tradition of his predecessor. Under Jin, censorship and internal

³⁰ The Chinese name for Urumchi is Tihua.

³¹ Forbes, *Warlords*, 66.

³² *ibid*, 29.

³³ Or Chin Shu-jen.

surveillance continued, as did the exploitation of the province's natural resources, the profits of which remained largely in the hands of the Chairman and his associates.

Even more so than Yang, Jin was strongly xenophobic. He was even suspicious of too much contact with the GMD in the east and so sought to limit trade with the rest of the country. However, the Soviets were not about to give up on their designs in Xinjiang. In the late 1920s they constructed a branch rail line to link Soviet Central Asia with the Trans-Siberian Railway. Part of the acknowledged purpose of the Turksib line, as it came to be called, was to "prevent the penetration of Western European capitalism into Sinkiang."³⁴ "With the completion of the Turksib in 1930 the Soviet economic stranglehold on Sinkiang became all but complete":³⁵ China's share in trade with Xinjiang gradually dropped as the Soviet share increased. At the same time, the railway made the Soviet Union even more accessible than it had been before and came to be the most efficient means of travelling to the province from the rest of China. "This naturally gave the Soviet government a degree of control over Nanking's relations with Urumchi through its ability to withhold visas, and thus to control the accessibility of Sinkiang to KMT officials."³⁶

In addition to the Russians, Jin also had problems with his Muslim subjects. In general, he was very intolerant of their religious traditions and did a number of things to openly antagonize them. The final straw came when he annexed the Kumul Khanate,³⁷ a small semi-autonomous state lying within the borders of Xinjiang, in 1930. The newly-subjected Kumulliks³⁸ had their land expropriated by the government in order that it could be given to Chinese settlers. Rebellion broke out in April 1931 and many Chinese were massacred by the local population; the uprising threatened to spread throughout the entire province. Another element entered into the situation as the Uighur³⁹ leaders of the revolt appealed for help to Ma Zhongying,⁴⁰ a Dungan (Chinese Muslim)⁴¹ warlord in Gansu province. Ma's troops marched to Kumul and laid siege to the government forces in the garrison there. Although he won victories elsewhere in the area, Ma was unable to capture the city and, when he was wounded in October, he had to withdraw his forces back to Gansu, thus temporarily leaving the Xinjiang Muslims to fight alone against Jin.

Although the Soviets were not directly involved in these events, it is interesting to note that the government forces included a number of White Russian

³⁴ Forbes, *Warlords*, 41.

³⁵ *ibid*, 41f.

³⁶ *ibid*, 42.

³⁷ The Chinese name for Kumul is Hami.

³⁸ In Turkic languages, the suffix *-lik* denotes the place that a person comes from.

³⁹ The Turkic Uighurs are the largest ethnic group in Xinjiang and are in part descended from the Uighurs who ruled Central Asia from the ninth to thirteenth centuries.

⁴⁰ Or Ma Chung-ying.

⁴¹ The Dungans are also known as the Hui.

troops who had taken refuge in Xinjiang after the Civil War in Russia. However, Soviet economic influence in the province continued to grow and the Soviet-Sinkiang Trading Company, known as Sovsintorg, established as a result of a trade agreement between Jin and the Soviets in October 1931, further helped this process. At the time, trade with the Soviet Union amounted to eighty percent of the provincial total, while China and British India only made up fifteen and five percent, respectively.⁴² "Leaning towards Russia was the only means by which the province could survive... Chin Shu-jen's behaviour towards Russia, justified or otherwise, doubtlessly established a precedent for Sheng Shih-ts'ai [his successor: see below] to follow."⁴³

Ma's retreat seemed to indicate that Jin had successfully quelled the uprising at Kumul, but the tensions continued to brew below the surface, the rebels in the north continued to operate, albeit in a subdued fashion, and the potential for a full-scale revolt began to spread to other parts of Xinjiang. In particular, "rumours and reports from the rebellious north-east continued to flood into the oases of the Tarim Basin [in southern Xinjiang], inflaming anti-Chinese feeling amongst an indigenous population already indignant at the imposition of increased taxes and forced issue of huge quantities of unbacked paper currency to pay for Chin's war effort."⁴⁴ At the same time, Jin had chosen to seek revenge on the Xinjiang Mongols for not joining him in suppressing the Kumul Rebellion by murdering their Regent and "Living Buddha," Tsetsen Puntsag Gegeen, in May 1932. Soon after, in July, Jin's forces began joint operations with Soviet forces in the border regions to put down insurgency amongst the Kirghiz.⁴⁵ Several months later, Ma Fu-ming, a Dungan general formerly in the employ of the government, sided with the rebels still operating in the north of the province, as a result of which Muslim rebellion in the northeast became centered in the Turfan Depression, located midway between Urumchi and Kumul. Isolated uprisings also began to occur in the south. With more and more of Jin's subjects alienated by his repressive measures, the stage was set for wide-spread rebellion.

The insurgency that had been simmering in the northeast began to spread and gain momentum. During the winter of 1932-33, beginning with the capture of key cities in the Turfan Depression, the rebels advanced southward to Kashgar, gradually bringing more and more area under their control, as local residents joined their forces. At the same time, in the south, the Muslim population began to actively revolt against

⁴² Fook-Lam Gilbert Chan, "The Road to Power: Sheng Shih-Ts'ai's Early Years in Sinkiang, 1930-1934," *Journal of Oriental Studies*, 7 (1969), "237.

⁴³ Chan, "Road to Power," 237.

⁴⁴ Forbes, *Warlords*, 70.

⁴⁵ The Kirghiz are a Turkic people living on both sides of the Tien Shan. As a result of Soviet collectivization policies in 1932, a large number of "Soviet" Kirghiz fled across the border to China, where, along with their "Chinese" brethren, they engaged in guerilla warfare with the Soviets, who were later joined by Jin's forces.

the government. Here, where Islam was stronger, the religious nature of the revolt came to the forefront. Simultaneously, rebels approached Kashgar from both the north and the south roads. The city fell in May 1933, thus terminating government control in the south of the province.

However, a power struggle soon emerged in the rebel forces between the Dungans, Chinese-speaking Muslims under the leadership of Ma Chan-ts'ang, and the Turkic Muslims. At the same time, there were also factions amongst the Turkic Muslims. Anarchy reigned throughout much of the area, as different leaders attempted to seize power; bloodshed was widespread, as rival groups fought each other, captured and executed their opponents, and ambushed and massacred each other's forces. Kashgar was initially controlled by the Uighur Temur and the Kirghiz Osman Ali, while in Khotan, a self-styled Khotan Islamic Government was set up under the *Amir* Muhammad Amin Bughra and his associates. In this environment, Dungan control of the area waned and that of the Khotan *Amirs*⁴⁶ grew. As a result of continuous fighting between the Dungans, Kirghiz, and Uighurs, morale in Kashgar plummeted. Temur was killed, Osman Ali fled, and, in the political vacuum that was left, the Khotan *Amirs* emerged as the undisputed rulers in southern Xinjiang in October 1933.

While all this was happening in the south, other developments were taking place in the north. In particular, a new figure had appeared on the scene who was destined to play a key role in Xinjiang for most of the rest of the Republican era: Sheng Shicai.⁴⁷ Sheng was a well-trained military man who had first come to Xinjiang during the winter of 1929-30.⁴⁸ Beginning as Chief of Staff of the Xinjiang Frontier Army, he was promoted in 1932 to Provincial Commander-in-Chief. An ambitious man, he did not have to wait long to move into a position of unqualified power in Xinjiang. His opportunity came with the re-emergence of the Dungans in the province.

Despite the fact that Ma Zhongying had withdrawn to Gansu, Dungan forces loyal to him had remained in Xinjiang. During the winter of 1932-33, at the same time that the Muslim rebels were moving towards Kashgar, these forces, under the leadership of Ma Shih-ming, supplemented by troops loyal to Ma Fu-ming, the government general who had defected, began to advance on Urumchi. They reached the city, the gates of which had been already closed, in February 1933. Fierce fighting broke out and the city was only saved by the valiant defense of the White Russian troops and the subsequent arrival of Sheng's forces. "The final death toll was probably

⁴⁶ All of the leaders of the Khotan government referred to themselves by the Islamic title *Amir*, meaning "ruler."

⁴⁷ Or Sheng Shih-ts'ai.

⁴⁸ For an account of Sheng's rise to power in Xinjiang, see Chan, "Road to Power."

in excess of 6,000 Chinese and Muslims."⁴⁹ The rebels withdrew to the surrounding countryside as Sheng's prestige grew.

Sheng's strength was further reinforced by the arrival in March of the GMD's North-East National Salvation Army via the Soviet Union. Apparently, the Soviets, concerned about the possible victory of the Muslims over Jin's weakened regime, were willing to accommodate the Chinese in this matter. Meanwhile, Jin's corrupt and incompetent administration of Xinjiang had continued to alienate not only the native population, but also those he relied on for the maintenance of his power. The matter came to a head when the White Russians carried out a successful coup in April 1933, forcing him to flee over the Soviet border. "Sheng Shih-ts'ai, who protested that he was 'only a common soldier' (but who enjoyed the full backing of both the White Russians and the North-East National Salvation Army), was confirmed in the all-powerful position of *Tupan* or Border Defence Commissioner, as *de facto* ruler of the province."⁵⁰

XINJIANG UNDER SHENG SHICAI

It was now time for Ma Zhongying to re-enter the struggle. During his period of convalescence in Gansu, he had amassed a large army through extensive conscription,⁵¹ as well as being appointed as Commanding Officer of the 36th Division of the National Army of China by the GMD government in Nanjing. This "highly ambitious young warlord, who was to dream, in his wilder moments, of creating a Muslim empire which would include the whole of Soviet, as well as Chinese, Central Asia,"⁵² began his march in May 1933. Kumul was easily taken, as well as other towns en route to the provincial capital. Sheng's forces were forced to retreat to Urumchi. Ground was alternatively gained and lost by both sides.

Throughout the whole conflict, it was uncertain which side had the backing of Nanjing, since both claimed allegiance to the GMD. Huang Mu-sung, a "Pacification Commissioner" from the Republican government soon arrived in Urumchi on an ostensible peace mission. Sheng suspected him of conspiring with some of his opponents to overthrow him. As a result, he executed three leaders of the provincial government, accusing them of plotting his overthrow with Huang. At the same time, Sheng also forced Huang to wire Nanjing with a recommendation that he be recognized as the official *Tupan* of Xinjiang.

Sheng's problems at this time were not all in the north, however. As Dungan armies marched on Urumchi from both sides, Ma Zhongying's forces having been

⁴⁹ Forbes, *Warlords*, 103.

⁵⁰ *ibid*, 106.

⁵¹ One estimate gives the size as 10,000 (*ibid*, 296).

⁵² *ibid*, 55.

joined by those of Chang P'ei-yüan, the military governor of Ili, potentially more significant events were taking place in southern Xinjiang. The Khotan *Amirs* were not content merely to control most of the south; their eventual goal was the establishment of an independent Muslim state. They had attempted to do so first in September 1933, after wooing Khoja Niyas Hajji, a leader in the Kumul uprising who had initially agreed to recognize Sheng's administration, with the offer of presidency of the "Republic of Eastern Turkestan." However, this republic was a state in name only and Khoja was reported to be negotiating with the Soviets, an unacceptable proposition for the *Amirs*, so in November of the same year they declared the establishment of the "Turkish-Islamic Republic of Eastern Turkestan" (TIRET). "The domestic policy of the TIRET was... directed towards the establishment of a radical Islamic system, based on the *Shari'a* [Islamic law] but encompassing certain educational, economic and social reforms, whilst its foreign policy was as staunchly anti-Soviet as it was anti-Tungan and anti-Han."⁵³

The government was led by the *Amirs*, with Khoja Niyas Hajji as titular President; the capital was at Kashgar. Their authority extended over the southern third of the province and they soon had all the trappings of a legitimate government, including a National Assembly, a legal system, a constitution, a flag, and a national currency. According to the British Consulate-General in Kashgar at the time, the TIRET had five basic policies:

1. To form an independent Muslim state.
2. To seek freedom from the 'Soviet stranglehold.'
3. To restore peace and put down lawlessness.
4. To encourage and restore trade.
5. To seek friendly relations with the British Government and to obtain its aid as far as possible.⁵⁴

However, this attempt to establish a lasting Islamic government in the area was to prove to be a failure. Neither Britain nor potential allies in the Muslim world, including Turkey and Afghanistan, were prepared to recognize or support the fledgling republic. Furthermore, "having adopted an uncompromisingly 'Turkic-Islamic' stance, it had deprived itself of effective allies whilst ensuring the enmity of the three most powerful forces in Sinkiang - the Tungans, the provincial authorities, and the Soviet Union."⁵⁵ It was this last force, whose influence had been limited up to this time, which was now to step firmly into Xinjiang politics.

By the end of 1933, Sheng's position was extremely shaky. Chang P'ei-yüan and the Dungans were marching on him in the north, while the TIRET controlled the

⁵³ *ibid*, 113.

⁵⁴ *ibid*, 114.

⁵⁵ *ibid*, 116.

south. There was no aid forthcoming from the Nationalist government of China. Thus, "it was at this eleventh hour that the Soviet Union, which had become increasingly disturbed by the continuing turmoil in Sinkiang, finally determined, in response to an urgent appeal from Sheng Shih-ts'ai, to intervene directly in support of the provincial authorities at Urumchi."⁵⁶ The Soviets were concerned about both threats to Sheng's administration. The TIRET, if allowed to survive, could provide a base of operations for pan-Turkic and pan-Islamic sentiments to spread into Soviet Central Asia. There were also reports of contacts between TIRET officials and representatives of Japan and Nazi Germany. At the same time, there were fears that Ma Zhongying, ardently anti-Soviet, could be used by the Japanese to set up a puppet regime in Xinjiang, as they had done with "Manchukuo."⁵⁷ Any of these developments, especially in light of the growing menace that Japan and Germany presented to the USSR, would have posed a serious threat to the Soviets. Thus, an agreement between Sheng and Moscow would be beneficial to both.

The first delegation of Soviet officials arrived in December 1933. A purge of "anti-Soviet" officials in the provincial administration, including Pappengut, the White Russian general, began. Sheng announced his "Six Basic Policies": (1) anti-imperialism, (2) kinship to Sovietism, (3) racial or national equality, (4) "clean" government, (5) peace, and (6) reconstruction.⁵⁸ In January 1934, Soviet troops crossed the border and attacked rebel positions in the Ili area. Chang P'ei-yüan's forces were defeated and the governor committed suicide. Despite valiant resistance, Ma Zhongying's troops were no match for the superior Soviet military machine, including aerial bombing, and were pushed back from Urumchi. In the south, Khoja Niyas Hajji was wooed away from the TIRET leadership by a Soviet offer of arms.

Having been unable to capture Urumchi, Ma Zhongying now turned south towards Kashgar. In February, "in a development which emphasised the deeply conflicting interests of Turkic-speaking and Chinese-speaking Muslims in southern Sinkiang, the capital of the secessionist TIRET was recaptured for Nanking not by the provincial forces of Sheng Shih-ts'ai, but by the Tungan forces of Ma Chung-ying."⁵⁹ At the same time, Khoja Niyas Hajji was negotiating with the Soviets to dissolve the TIRET, in return for receiving the post of "Civil Governor for Life," under Sheng's administration. Fighting between the Dungans and the forces loyal to the Khotan *Amirs* continued for the next several months, and by July 1934, all the TIRET leaders had been either killed in battle or hanged or had fled to British India. Ma Zhongying,

⁵⁶ *ibid*, 117.

⁵⁷ *ibid*, 118.

⁵⁸ *ibid*, 120.

⁵⁹ *ibid*, 122.

now firmly in control of Kashgar, denounced Sheng as a Soviet puppet and reaffirmed his allegiance to the GMD government.

However, Ma's bid for British support fell on deaf ears and, in a surprising move, he turned to the Soviets for aid. In a sequence of events which still remains a mystery, he crossed over the Soviet border in July and was never heard from again. It seems that he struck a deal with the Soviets and some reports indicate that he may even have been given a position in the Red Army. Certainly, his presence in the USSR was advantageous to the Soviets, for "with Ma Chung-ying safely removed from the political stage in Sinkiang and living in the Soviet Union as 'honoured guest', the Kremlin would retain a card which might be played to great effect against a possibly recalcitrant Sheng Shih-ts'ai, or indeed, should the necessity arise, against a hostile Nanking or an expansionist Japan."⁶⁰ In the power vacuum created by the collapse of the TIRET and Ma's departure, provincial forces loyal to Sheng were able to recapture Kashgar a few weeks later. In September 1934, a truce was signed between the Dungan forces and the provincial authorities.

Following this truce, Ma Hu-shan, Ma Zhongying's brother-in-law, proceeded to set up what was called by one Western observer "Tunganistan," "a Tungan satrapy where Hui Muslims ruled as colonial masters over their Turkic-speaking Muslim subjects."⁶¹ This state within a state, with its "capital" in Khotan, was avowedly loyal to Nanjing and was to remain in power until 1937. Neither staunchly Islamic, as the TIRET had been, nor pro-Soviet, as Sheng's government was, it was merely another manifestation of the rampant warlordism so prevalent in Republican China at the time. The regime was characterised by autocratic rule, Chinese colonialism, strong militarism, and excessive taxation. As a Western observer noted at the time, "The whole aim of the government is to provide the military with the necessary money and supplies, while the needs of the people are entirely disregarded."⁶²

Meanwhile, Ma Hu-shan regularly received telegrams, ostensibly from his brother-in-law in the USSR, promising the leader of Tunganistan that Ma Zhongying would soon return, thus stalling him in any move he might make against Sheng's forces. "Beneath this continuing Soviet deception lay a deeper stratum of diplomatic and military purpose, for by 1937, when Ma Hu-shan seems finally to have despaired of Ma Chung-ying's return to Sinkiang, Soviet control had been firmly established over Sheng Shih-ts'ai, whilst the military inactivity of the Tungan armies had undermined the very fabric of 'Tunganistan' from within."⁶³ As early as 1935, there

⁶⁰ *ibid*, 126

⁶¹ *ibid*, 128.

⁶² *ibid* 130.

⁶³ *ibid*, 134.

were Uighur uprisings and a Dungan mutiny in "Tunganistan," evidence of the unstable nature of the warlord's domain.

In August 1934, Sheng issued his Eight-Point Declaration, a plan to reform the entire political and social structure of the province: (1) equality among races, (2) religious freedom, (3) rural relief, (4) financial reforms, (5) administrative reforms, (6) extension of education, (7) introduction of local self-government, and (8) judicial reforms.⁶⁴ Certainly, some efforts were made to institute some of these reforms, moreso than under Sheng's predecessors. However, at the same time, "he created a 'family hierarchy' which was as corrupt as Chin Shu-jen's [and] to protect himself from his political opponents, he developed an elaborate network of secret police."⁶⁵ More significantly, in the eyes of his critics, he came increasingly under the control of the Soviets. That control can be seen clearly in the seventh of the "nine chief duties" of the provincial government, also proclaimed in 1934:

1. To eradicate corruption.
2. To develop economy and culture.
3. To maintain peace by avoiding war.
4. To mobilise all manpower for the cultivation of land.
5. To facilitate communications.
6. To keep Sinkiang for ever a Chinese province.
7. To start the work of anti-imperialism and anti-Fascism, and to maintain a close Sino-Russian relationship.
8. To construct a "New Sinkiang."
9. To protect the positions and privileges of religious leaders.⁶⁶

Sheng justified his alliance with the Soviets by maintaining that Russia was "definitely not an aggressive country," was "ready to aid the weak races in the world," and was "non-aggressive towards Sinkiang," that China could "only be saved and liberated by perpetuating her intimate connection with Russia," that Xinjiang could "never afford to reconstruct itself without the help of Russia," that Xinjiang would "permanently remain a Chinese province if it succeeded in keeping the friendship of Russia," and that only the maintenance of a healthy relationship with Russia would enable Xinjiang to "tread on the path of anti-imperialism" (Sheng saw Japan as the chief imperialist threat to Xinjiang).⁶⁷

The maintenance of "a close Sino-Russian relationship" was quickly put into effect, as Soviet economic and military aid, troops, and advisors poured into the

⁶⁴ Fook-Lam Gilbert Chan, "Sheng Shih'Ts'ai's Reform Programs in Sinkiang," *Bulletin of the Institute of Modern History - Academia Sinica (Taiwan)*, 12 (1983), 375. This article contains a good discussion of Sheng's "reforms" and the motives behind them.

⁶⁵ Chan, "Reform Programs," 382.

⁶⁶ Chan, "Road to Power," 255.

⁶⁷ Chan, "Road to Power," 256.

province. Russians were soon involved in everything from oil drilling to education to military training. In the areas that Sheng controlled, mostly in the north, Russian became the main foreign language studied in school, many young people were sent to the USSR to study, atheistic propaganda became commonplace, mosques were converted into social clubs or theatres, and religious leaders were persecuted. A secret treaty is said to have been signed, guaranteeing that the Soviets would assist Xinjiang "politically, economically and by armed force... in case of some external attack upon the province."⁶⁸ In the words of a former Soviet advisor in Xinjiang, "According to Stalin's plan, Sinkiang was to become a sphere of exclusive Russian influence and to serve as a bulwark of our power in the east.... Sinkiang was soon a Soviet colony in all but name."⁶⁹

In the spring of 1937, rebellion again broke out in southern Xinjiang. A number of factors contributed to the outbreak. In an effort to appease the Turkic Muslims, Sheng had appointed a number of their non-secessionist leaders, including Khoja Niyas Hajji and Yulbars Khan, another leader of the Kumul uprising, to positions of influence in the provincial government, both in Urumchi and Kashgar. At the same time, educational reforms, which attacked basic Islamic principles, and the atheistic propaganda program, which was being extended into the south, were further alienating the local population from Sheng's administration. In Kashgar, Mahmud Shih-chang, a wealthy Muslim and one of Sheng's appointees, became the focal point for opposition to the government. Meanwhile, in Afghanistan, Muhammad Amin Bughra, the exiled leader of the TIRET, had approached the Japanese ambassador in 1935 with "a detailed plan proposing the establishment of an 'Eastern Turkestan Republic' under Japanese sponsorship, with munitions and finance to be supplied by Tokyo.... he suggested as the future leader of this proposed Central Asian 'Manchukuo' none other than Mahmud Shih-chang." However, this plan was aborted when Mahmud, fearful for his life, fled from Kashgar to India in April 1937.

Mahmud's flight sparked an uprising amongst his troops against provincial authorities. Those who were pro-Soviet in any way were executed and yet another independent Muslim administration was set up. As before, this revolt had a decidedly Islamic nature. At the same time, uprisings broke out amongst the Kirghiz near Kucha and once again in Kumul. In this context, Ma Hu-shan decided to make his move from Khotan and captured Kashgar from the rebels in June. However, the situation was not to last long. 5,000 Red Army troops, with airborne and armoured vehicle reinforcements, invited by Sheng to intervene, were already on their way to southern Xinjiang, along with Sheng's forces and mutinous Dungan troops. The Turkic rebels

⁶⁸ Forbes, *Warlords*, 137.

⁶⁹ *ibid*, 136.

were defeated, Kashgar was retaken and Ma Hu-shan's administration collapsed. By October 1937, with the collapse of the Turkic rebellion and the Dungan "satrapy," Muslim control of the south once again came to an end. Shortly after, the rebellions in Kumul and amongst the Kirghiz were also put down, thus establishing Sheng, for the first time, as the actual ruler of the whole province.

"It soon became apparent, however, that the price of Sheng's supremacy was to be almost complete domination, both politically and economically, of Sinkiang by the Soviet Union."⁷⁰ A permanent Red Army unit, the 8th Regiment, was established at Kumul, ostensibly to guard against a possible Japanese strike via Inner Mongolia. Besides accomplishing this purpose, this move also erected a barrier to further influence from the three other forces that could challenge the USSR's control of the province: the GMD government in Nanjing; the "Five Ma" warlord group that controlled the adjacent provinces of Gansu, Qinghai, and Ningxia;⁷¹ and the local Muslim population, which had shown such an inclination to rebellion.⁷² Soviet military presence in the province was increased as a result of the signing of the Sino-Soviet Non-Agression Pact in August 1937. This agreement guaranteed Soviet military assistance to the Nationalist government, in order to stem the tide of the Japanese invasion of northern China, and the obvious route for transporting arms and military vehicles from the USSR to China lay through Xinjiang. An airplane factory and flying school were soon established in the province.

However, Soviet influence was not only in the military realm. By this time, the economy was virtually completely under the monopoly of the Soviets as well. Besides oil, various other natural resources were being openly exploited by the USSR without the permission of the Nationalist government (which was hardly in a position to object, as it was undergoing the full brunt of the Japanese invasion in the east). The 1940 Tin Mines Agreement gave the Soviets "exclusive rights for the prospection, investigation and exploitation of tin and its ancillary minerals"⁷³ in the province. The financial reimbursement that Xinjiang received for this exploitation was minimal. At the same time, steps were taken to negate the influence of any other foreign power in Xinjiang. The British authorities, who had long since been eclipsed by the Soviets in terms of influence in Xinjiang, were subjected to increased harassment.

In all of this, despite some limited protests, Sheng readily complied with Soviet dictates. As one authority notes, "the ruler of Sinkiang followed his natural inclination to flow with the tide; thus the chameleon warlord became 'Redder than

⁷⁰ *ibid*, 144f.

⁷¹ Ma Zhongying had come from this group.

⁷² Forbes, *Warlords*, 145.

⁷³ *ibid*, 148.

Red'.⁷⁴ A secret police force modelled after and controlled by the NKVD, called the Pao-an-tui (Security Preservation Corps) was created and, as a result, police terror and surveillance became widespread. When the Great Stalinist Purge swept the Soviet Union in 1937, the search for "Trotskyites" and "Fascists" spilled over into Xinjiang and many leaders, Turkic, Dungan, and Han Chinese, were eliminated. "In retrospect, it is clear that the only factor linking the ethnically and politically diverse 'Fascist-Trotskyite plotters' was their opposition... to the Soviet-sponsored *status quo* in Sinkiang and, more particularly, to Sheng Shih-ts'ai himself."⁷⁵ Following the purge, Sheng visited Moscow in 1938 where he became a member of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU).⁷⁶ It is interesting to note that Stalin had previously vetoed an earlier request by Sheng to join the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), thus showing that the Soviet Union's concerns extended beyond merely ensuring that Xinjiang had a Communist government. Upon his return to Urumchi, Sheng proceeded to endorse every move that Stalin made as World War II unfolded. "By 1939... Sinkiang, though still nominally part of China, had become a virtual dependency of the Soviet Union, differing scarcely at all from the neighbouring Mongolian People's Republic."⁷⁷

The honeymoon was not to last long, however. Three events happened in 1941 which resulted in Sheng's loyalty shifting away from the Soviets and back to the GMD. In April, the Soviet Union signed a non-aggression pact with Japan. In June, Hitler invaded the USSR. In December, the United States entered the war on the side of Nationalist China. The combined effect of these developments was to convince Sheng, staunchly anti-Japanese and ever the pragmatist, that the Soviets were no longer a desirable ally. For his part, Chiang Kai-shek, recognizing the inevitability of a conflict between the GMD and the CCP once the war was over, also saw the need to have Xinjiang firmly in his camp.

Talks between Sheng and the GMD began in March 1942. By October, the negotiations were complete and Xinjiang was once again allied with Nationalist China. For his part, Sheng quickly carried out a purge of all pro-Soviet elements in the province. Among those arrested and executed was Mao Zemin, Mao Zedong's brother, who had been sent to Xinjiang along with a number of other CCP cadres to help Sheng. The Soviets were given three months to withdraw all their military and technical personnel. In June 1943, GMD troops began to enter Xinjiang. By October, the Soviets had completely withdrawn from the province. However, Sheng's shifting of allegiance was not over yet. In the wake of Japanese victories against the

⁷⁴ *ibid*, 151.

⁷⁵ *ibid*, 151.

⁷⁶ Sheng later claimed that he had actually become a Marxist in 1919, as a result of studying in Japan.

⁷⁷ Forbes, *Warlords*, 152.

Nationalists in August 1944, he reinstated martial law and began arresting GMD officials and those sympathetic to the Nationalists in Xinjiang. Such actions could no longer be tolerated by the GMD and in September, Sheng was reassigned to a post in the Nationalist capital of Chongqing⁷⁸ and flown out of Xinjiang.

XINJIANG AFTER SHENG SHICAI

The first GMD official to be appointed to the position of Chairman of the Xinjiang provincial government was Wu Zhongxin,⁷⁹ a follower of the "Great Han" school of thought, "which holds that all the inhabitants of China belong to one (Chinese) family, and that incidental differences of culture, religion and language are unfortunate aberrations, destined to be subsumed in a 'Greater Han' Chinese whole."⁸⁰ This attitude resulted in the encouragement of large numbers of Han Chinese to settle in the province. Such an approach was hardly appropriate in the ethnically volatile situation in Xinjiang. Wu's efforts to govern the province were not helped any by the dismal economic situation either. Following the Soviet withdrawal, trade had virtually ground to a halt and inflation, shortages, and corruption had become rampant. Furthermore, the much-hated secret police continued to operate, only now under GMD sponsorship. As a popular saying of the time stated, "One Sheng Shih-ts'ai went out, but two came in."⁸¹

Once again, revolt broke out in Xinjiang. This time, however, it was centered in the north and involved the Kazakhs, a nomadic Turkic group who live with their flocks and herds in the nebulous border region where Xinjiang, the USSR, and Mongolia meet.⁸² From the very beginning of Sheng's rule in Xinjiang, there had been unrest in Jungaria, the Kazakh homeland in the province, and a number of small uprisings had occurred. Towards the end of his regime, this unrest had increased as the Soviets had once again entered into the Xinjiang political arena, this time on the side of Sheng's enemies. Representatives from the Kazakh SSR and the Mongolian People's Republic (MPR),⁸³ a Soviet satellite state,⁸⁴ had met with Osman Batur, a

⁷⁸ The Japanese had forced the Nationalists to retreat from their former capital in Nanjing and re-establish themselves in Chongqing.

⁷⁹ Or Wu Chung-hsin.

⁸⁰ Forbes, *Warlords*, 163f.

⁸¹ *ibid*, 165.

⁸² In addition to the Kazakhs who had lived on the Chinese side of the border since the incorporation of Xinjiang into China, an additional 300,000 had fled from the Russian side of the border in 1916, in the wake of a revolt protesting the conscription of Central Asians into the Russian army, and an unknown number fled during the Russian Civil War. Later on, as a result of both starvation and emigration to Xinjiang, due to Stalin's forced collectivization of these nomads, the number of Soviet Kazakhs fell by over 800,000 between the two Soviet censuses of 1926 and 1939 (Geoffrey Wheeler, "Russia and China in Central Asia," *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society*, 54 (1967), 257).

⁸³ The MPR had been established, with substantial Soviet assistance, in 1924.

Kazakh chieftain, in 1943. With the provision of arms and a safe base of operations in the MPR which had come from this meeting, Osman had "formulated a policy that called for Kazakh-Mongol co-operation within an autonomous Altai region, and for the barring of all Han Chinese military and civilian officials from that region."⁸⁵ When Sheng's troops had advanced into the area, they had reportedly been met not only by Kazakh horsemen, but also by Soviet aircraft and troops from the MPR. Whether this report is true or not, the result of the clash was that Osman gained complete control of Jungaria.

Shortly after the departure of Sheng, a full-scale revolt broke out in the Ili Valley, in Kazakh territory. This area, with its historical ties to Russia, had suffered more than others as a result of the cessation of Soviet trade. The break with the USSR had also resulted in a number of "pro-Soviet" Muslims having to flee over the border to escape Sheng's anti-Soviet purges, where they formed the "Sinkiang Turkic People's National Liberation Committee" (STPNLC) in 1943. In the fall of 1944, the unrest in Jungaria spread to the Ili Valley as Turkic rebels captured a GMD garrison at Nilka. The Soviets were quick to take advantage of this new situation; although it seems that the Ili Rebellion was initially merely a spontaneous uprising bred in the general disillusionment amongst the local population, the STPNLC soon maneuvered itself into a position of control. Once again, a local figure emerged as a charismatic leader. This time it was an Uighur who had received most of his education in the Soviet Union, Ahmadjan Qasimi. With the capture of the GMD positions in Kulja, the main city in the Ili Valley, in November 1944, the "Eastern Turkestan Republic" (ETR) was proclaimed. Although the official president was the Uzbek⁸⁶ Ali Khan Türe, real power lay in the hands of Qasimi. Although the precise nature of the role that the Soviets played in this rebellion remains unclear, "it is now possible to state with certainty that the Soviet Union was deeply involved in the establishment of the ETR."⁸⁷

The ETR was of necessity based on a coalition of "conservatives" (those favouring a more openly "Turkic-Islamic" government) and "progressives" (the pro-Soviet STPNLC faction). However, the latter group soon came to dominate the leadership and included Russians,⁸⁸ Soviet agents and Saifuddin Azizov, an Uighur who had studied in Tashkent and had joined the CPSU. The fledgling government quickly set out to control the whole of the Ili Valley, a feat which they accomplished

⁸⁴ In addition to the Soviet Kazakhs and those living in Xinjiang, there are also sizable numbers in the MPR.

⁸⁵ Forbes, *Warlords*, 171.

⁸⁶ The Uzbeks are a Turkic group who are found in large numbers in Soviet Central Asia.

⁸⁷ Forbes, *Warlords*, 177.

⁸⁸ By this time, it seems that both the "Whites" and the "Reds" had largely forgotten the Civil War and had joined forces in the Ili region.

by January 1945 by capturing GMD garrisons in the area. Although contemporary reports are inconclusive, it seems that Red Army troops played a key role in this expansion of the ETR sphere of influence.⁸⁹ In the process, atrocities were committed on both sides. At this time, Osman Batur sided with the ETR, thus bringing his Kazakh troops into the conflict; soon, most of Jungaria was at least nominally joined to the territory of the new republic.

In January 1945, the ETR issued the "Kulja Declaration," in which the following aims of the republic were set out:

1. The 'annihilation' of the Kuomintang.
2. The creation of a 'Democratic Base' founded on the equality of all nationalities inhabiting the territory of the ETR.
3. The formation of a competent, multi-national People's Army.
4. Nationalisation of banks; postal, telegraphic and telephone communications; forestry; and mineral resources.
5. The development of industry, agriculture, stock-breeding and private trade.
6. The establishment and preservation of religious freedom.
7. The development of educational and public health services.
8. The establishment of friendly relations with 'all democratic countries of the world' and, in particular, with Sinkiang's 'next-door neighbour', the Soviet Union.⁹⁰

Initially, the program of the ETR was decidedly anti-Han, and the "conservatives" sought to implement an Islamic style of government, thus excluding non-Muslims in the region⁹¹ from involvement in the republic, but this aspect was diminished as the "progressives" gained more power in the leadership of the republic. In the words of a Soviet source, "The progressive representatives of the national minorities became convinced that only the victory of the Chinese people [led by the CCP]... could bring freedom to the nationalities of the country."⁹² Progress was indeed made in the areas of education, agriculture, and public health. As the TIRET had done before it, the ETR established a tax system, produced its own currency and formed an army. This latter institution, the "Ili National Army" (INA), was headed up by members of the STPNLC faction. At the same time, propaganda leaflets produced in the republic "emphasised the close ethnic and cultural ties existing between the ETR and the Soviet Central Asian Republics, and... stressed the 'freedom' enjoyed by

⁸⁹ Forbes, *Warlords*, 181.

⁹⁰ *ibid*, 183.

⁹¹ Besides the Han and the Russians, other non-Muslim nationalities in the area included the Mongols, the Manchus, and the Xibos.

⁹² "Sinkiang, 1928-59," 443. This was written in 1959, before the Sino-Soviet dispute erupted.

the various national minorities within the Soviet Union when contrasted with the oppression suffered by the peoples of Sinkiang living in the region still under KMT control."⁹³

Beginning in July 1945, the ETR began to expand its territory, as the INA went on the offensive. Although the GMD troops had superior numbers and modern American weaponry, they suffered defeat after defeat at the hands of the rebels. Again, contemporary accounts vary in their attempts to explain how this happened, but it is almost certain that the INA was greatly assisted by the Soviets at this time. The army possessed heavy artillery and armoured vehicles, and the battalions were accompanied by Soviet military advisors. By the fall of 1945, the rebels had advanced to within seventy miles of Urumchi and the provincial government was contemplating evacuation to Kumul. Simultaneously, both Kazakh and Kirghiz rebels had spilled over into the Tarim Basin, capturing a number of significant towns, including Aksu and Tashkurghan.

In September, when GMD rule in Xinjiang seemed doomed to complete defeat, the Nationalist General Zhang Zhizhong⁹⁴ was dispatched by Chongqing to Xinjiang and approached the Soviets with the ultimatum that "unless a cease-fire were effected immediately, China would make an international affair of the matter."⁹⁵ Zhang's delegation to Xinjiang included a number of prominent Uighurs, including the former Khotan *Amir* Muhammad Amin Bughra and two other anti-Soviet Turkic nationalists, Masud Sabri and Isa Yusuf Alptekin. The Soviets intervened and a ceasefire was called. Negotiations began in October and the peace treaty was finalized in June 1946. In the end, the rebels agreed to disband the ETR, in exchange for Nationalist concessions which granted the local population much more autonomy in Xinjiang. The INA was permitted to continue to exist as a "Peace Preservation Corps," theoretically answerable to Zhang.

Why did the Soviets agree to negotiate this treaty when their puppet regime was so close to taking over the entire provincial government? One Western scholar suggests a number of possible reasons: "The Soviet Union had attained its primary aims in Sinkiang and had no good reason for encouraging further INA advances on Urumchi. By extending its 'all-out support' to the Ili rebels,... the Kremlin had effectively re-established its primacy in the traditionally Soviet-influenced border districts of Ili, Chuguchak and Shara Sume."⁹⁶ This had given the USSR access to the valuable natural resources found in the area, including oil, tungsten, copper, gold, and uranium. In addition, control of the "Three Regions," as the border districts were

⁹³ Forbes, *Warlords*, 185.

⁹⁴ Or Chang Chih-chung.

⁹⁵ Forbes, *Warlords*, 190.

⁹⁶ *ibid*, 193f.

called, "provided the Soviet Union with an important political card which could be played both in the international theatre... and on the regional stage, where Stalin remained uncertain as to the eventual outcome of the Nationalist-Communist power struggle in China and therefore as to which side to back."⁹⁷ Finally, "the further the rebel forces pushed from Ili, the weaker Soviet control became over the movement... beyond the narrow confines of the Ili Valley anti-Soviet sentiment was rife amongst the independent Kazakhs of the Altai region, and still more so amongst the traditionally conservative Muslim population of the Tarim Basin."⁹⁸

With the conclusion of the armistice between the ETR and the GMD, a new coalition government was formed in Xinjiang, with Zhang replacing Wu as Provincial Chairman and Ahmadjan Qasimi as Provincial Vice-Chairman. A number of other members of the STPNLC faction, as well as Muhammad Amin Bughra, Isa Yusuf Alptekin, Masud Sabri, and the Tatar Burhan Shahidi were represented in the cabinet. Zhang proceeded to institute economic, tax, legal, and penal reforms and admitted that "in many respects, the policies adopted by the Sinkiang government in the past were entirely wrong - no different, in fact, than the policies of imperialist nations towards their colonies."⁹⁹ However, Zhang's apparently sincere desire to reform the system was not shared by his GMD colleagues and the political reality in Xinjiang changed little at this time, with the STPNLC (and hence the Soviets) continuing to control the "Three Regions" and the GMD Han appointees holding the reins of power in the rest of the province.

In the area under STPNLC control, Soviet influence had scarcely diminished with the end of the ETR. Signs in Russian, the exclusive trade with the USSR, the presence of Soviet doctors and technicians, and the continued export of natural resources over the border all testified to this fact. However, not all who lived in this region were satisfied with the existing state of affairs. Shortly after the signing of the GMD-ETR agreement, the Kazakh leader Osman Batur, a true nomad who was reluctant to give allegiance to anyone, broke away from the rest of the STPNLC leadership. His departure was the catalyst for large-scale defections of Kazakh horsemen to GMD-controlled territory. Eventually, Osman allied himself with right-wing elements within the GMD.

The establishment of the coalition government also enabled the GMD to put down a revolt in the south which had been brewing since the summer of 1945, when, as noted above, Kirghiz rebels from the Tien Shan had moved into the Tarim Basin. In the tradition of most rebellions in the south, this uprising seems to have been

⁹⁷ *ibid*, 194.

⁹⁸ *ibid*, 195.

⁹⁹ *ibid*, 200.

largely Islamic in nature, although there were reports of troops from the Soviet Central Asian Republics being engaged in the fighting.¹⁰⁰

Zhang's well-meaning attempts at reform met with little success, and his attempts to conciliate all of the different political factions in the province ended up in a situation where no-one was satisfied. Widespread riots broke out in Urumchi in early 1947, as the Uighur population demanded a greater role in the government of the province. The result was that Zhang was replaced by Masud Sabri as the first non-Han governor of Xinjiang in May of that year. However, Sabri seems to have been little more than a puppet figure through whom the GMD continued to exert control over the government and his appointment was met by a further series of demonstrations throughout the province. These riots soon led to the collapse of the coalition government, as many of the members of the Provincial Assembly, including those from the "Three Regions," left the capital for Kulja. "Sinkiang was once again split into two mutually hostile zones with no direct communication possible between Urumchi and Kulja."¹⁰¹

Once again, the Soviet Union, perhaps nervous about Masud's anti-Soviet stance, intervened militarily in Xinjiang affairs. This time, the area of conflict was far to the north, in the disputed region of Pei-ta-shan, a small mountain range in the still undefined Sino-Mongolian border region. This was where the Kazakhs under Osman Batur had withdrawn to after his break with the STPNLC faction in Kulja. During the summer of 1946, there had been clashes between the Kazakh nomads and MPR troops. Shortly after Masud's appointment as Governor, in June 1947, the latter, reportedly backed by Soviet planes, attacked the former. In response, Urumchi dispatched a Dungan cavalry regiment to the area. Clashes between the two sides continued until July 1948. "By maintaining indirect pressure on China in the Pei-ta-shan sector of Sinkiang... Moscow undoubtedly sought to hasten the demise of the Masud Sabri regime in Sinkiang without, however, openly breaking with the Nationalist authorities in Nanking."¹⁰² Meanwhile, the two Xinjiangs grew further and further apart; the GMD government was increasingly controlled by Han Chinese, while the Kulja regime, dominated by Turkic Muslims and Russians, actively excluded the Han from political power.

As these developments unfolded in Xinjiang, other significant events were taking place in the rest of China. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) was steadily winning the Civil War with the GMD government. Rather than viewing this as a welcome end to the ongoing conflict in China, Stalin saw this as a threat to Soviet interests in Xinjiang. As long as the two were fighting each other, the USSR could

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, 204f.

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, 211.

¹⁰² *ibid.*, 215.

continue to exercise her influence in the province. Once either one emerged as the sole victor, that control would become much more difficult. The CCP shared the basic ideology of the Soviet Union, but this was not the only concern of Stalin, who "must long have suspected that Mao Zedong was a Chinese nationalist first, a communist second, and a loyal disciple of the Comintern scarcely at all."¹⁰³ In October 1947, Zhang and Burhan Shahidi had held secret talks with the Soviets in Nanjing. Subsequent talks had continued throughout the rest of the year and into the next. In December 1948, Shahidi, who had grown up in Russia prior to the 1917 Revolution and had served as Sheng's consul in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, replaced Masud Sabri as Chairman of the province. However, although negotiations continued from January to May 1949, the GMD and the USSR failed to come to an agreement over the future of Xinjiang. By this time, it was too late for either party to prevent the CCP from gaining control of the province. On September 24, 1949, GMD troops in Xinjiang surrendered to the PLA and the next day, Burhan Shahidi officially transferred his allegiance from the GMD to the CCP. On October 1, the People's Republic of China (PRC) was proclaimed in Beijing.

XINJIANG AFTER THE CCP VICTORY¹⁰⁴

The Communist authorities moved quickly in Xinjiang. Over the next two years, CCP power was consolidated in the province as the potential enemies of the new regime were gradually converted to the cause or eliminated, one way or another. Burhan Shahidi became the Chairman of the first CCP provincial government,¹⁰⁵ with Saifuddin Azizov, who subsequently resigned from the CPSU and joined the CCP, as his right hand man.¹⁰⁶ Zhang Zhizhong also threw in his lot with the CCP. Ahmadjan Qasimi and most of the other former leaders of the ETR were mysteriously killed in a plane crash in August 1949. The Uighur nationalists Muhammad Amin Bughra and Isa Yusuf Alptekin fled to Turkey via India in 1949, where the latter still heads up an organization of Eastern Turkestani emigres who seek political freedom for their homeland. The Kazakh chieftain Osman Batur was eventually captured and executed in February 1951. The Uighur nationalist Yulbars Khan fled to Taiwan via Tibet and India in 1951. Masud Sabri was arrested in 1951 and subsequently died in jail.

Beijing also took deliberate steps to replace Soviet influence in Xinjiang with a Chinese presence. A purge in 1951 removed pro-Soviet leaders in the area formerly

¹⁰³ *ibid.*, 218.

¹⁰⁴ For a more detailed account of Xinjiang since 1949, see McMillen, *Communist Power*. For the effect that Communist rule has had on the Kazakhs, see George Moseley, *A Sino-Soviet Cultural Frontier: The Ili Kazakh Autonomous Chou*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966).

¹⁰⁵ Shahidi was to retain this post until 1955.

¹⁰⁶ Azizov became Chairman of Xinjiang after Shahidi and lasted until 1978, when he fell from grace in the wake of Mao's death.

controlled by the STPNLC and political structures which had been instituted by the Soviets were disbanded. In 1950, a program to promote Han immigration into Xinjiang was announced. An administrative structure was set up which would enable the Chinese to more effectively govern the province, which was reconstituted as the "Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region" in 1955. Soviet influence continued to wane throughout the late fifties,¹⁰⁷ and vanished altogether in the wake of the Sino-Soviet rift which had been developing for some time, but which only became evident to the world in the early sixties. The last Soviet Consulate in Xinjiang was removed in 1962.

There followed two decades of "cold war" between the two powers. The main weapons in Central Asia were the airwaves, as Beijing and Urumchi broadcast propaganda into the USSR while Radio Alma-Ata¹⁰⁸ and Radio Tashkent¹⁰⁹ responded with programs designed to impress the Chinese Uighurs with the vastly superior conditions that the Soviet Uighurs lived under.¹¹⁰ In addition, a newspaper by the name of "Sherki Türkistan Evazi" ("The Voice of Eastern Turkestan") was published in Alma-Ata, calling on Uighurs "to unite against Chinese chauvinism and to proclaim the establishment of 'an independent free state' based on the principles of self-determination and the constitutional law of the United Nations."¹¹¹

Although there were no major border clashes such as occurred on Chenpao Island in the Ussuri River in Manchuria in 1969, there were frequent periods of tension along the Xinjiang border. These tensions were only escalated by Chinese maps showing the Sino-Soviet border running far to the west of its actual location, thus incorporating part of the Kazakh SSR into China. It appeared that Chairman Mao intended to expand China's territory to the "Qianlong Line," named after the Qing emperor of that name who had extended Chinese influence well into what is now Soviet territory. Soviet apprehension about the proximity of Xinjiang was further raised by the Chinese nuclear test site at Lop Nor in the Tarim Basin, only 1,300 miles from the Soviet space center in Baikanour, in the Kazakh SSR.¹¹²

¹⁰⁷ One interesting exception to this trend was the decision in 1957 by the Chinese authorities to use the Cyrillic alphabet for the Turkic languages of Xinjiang. Prior to this time, they had been written primarily in the Arabic script, although it seems that many of the Kazakh intelligentsia in Xinjiang had been using the Cyrillic script since the 1940s. This decision was reversed, however, in 1959, when a Romanized script similar to Pinyin was adopted. This latter script never caught on with the general public, however, and there has since been a return to the Arabic script, which was officially reinstated in 1982.

¹⁰⁸ Alma-Ata is the capital of the Kazakh SSR.

¹⁰⁹ Tashkent is the capital of the Uzbek SSR.

¹¹⁰ See Lowell Tillet, "The National Minorities Factor in the Sino-Soviet Dispute," *Orbis*, 21 (1971), 251ff.

¹¹¹ "M.E. Uighur," "Sherki Türkistan Evazi (The Voice of Eastern Turkestan)," *Central Asian Survey*, 1:2/3 (1982-1983), 127f.

¹¹² For more in-depth information on these and related developments, see Rasma Silde-Karklins, "The Uighurs Between China and the USSR," *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 17 (1975), 341-364; Tillet, "Minorities Factor"; Wheeler, "Russia and China." For general impressions of contemporary life in Xinjiang, see David Bonovia, "Easing the Grip on Minorities," *Far Eastern Economic Review*,

During this time, there were also several reported internal uprisings, including "a mass exodus of tens of thousands of Muslim minority peoples [from the Ili prefecture] from the PRC to the Soviet Union" in 1962. Attempts to halt this movement by the authorities "touched off sympathy demonstrations and rioting in other areas of Xinjiang."¹¹³ Ethnic riots again broke out in 1980 and 1981 in Kashgar and Aksu. In a move reminiscent of events during the 1930s, "after a week of rioting, a band of 200 Uighurs tried to storm an army base outside the city [of Kashgar]."¹¹⁴

Since the beginning of the 1980s, there has been a general thaw in Sino-Soviet relations that has resulted in a state of affairs in Xinjiang which is vaguely reminiscent of the earlier part of this century, when the Soviets played a key role in the province. The decade saw the opening of border crossings in 1981 and the normalization of Sino-Soviet relations in 1983, resulting in increased trade between Xinjiang and the USSR; plans for the re-establishment of regular flights between Alma-Ata and Urumchi; the possibility of a rail link between the two cities; the solicitation of Soviet technical assistance in exploiting the natural resources of the province; increased tourist traffic across the border; the opening of a Bureau of Foreign Economic Relations and Trade of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in Dushanbe, Tajik SSR; the reopening of the Soviet Consulate in Urumchi; and the curtailment of Soviet anti-Chinese activities, such as the propagandistic Uighur broadcasts and the publication of "Sherki Türkistan Evazi."¹¹⁵ In light of recent political developments in both the USSR and China, however, the future of Sino-Soviet relations in Xinjiang is still uncertain.

CONCLUSION

The Chinese Republican era saw the most significant extension of Russian influence (in its Soviet form, of course) into Xinjiang that has ever occurred. It was inevitable that the Chinese and Russians should have clashed in this area, what with China's two thousand year-old claim on the territory as part of her rightful sphere of influence, and Russia's perennial concern to protect her southern and eastern flanks from Turkic and Islamic upheaval (and, later on, from British and Japanese designs in Central Asia). Both powers wanted to have Xinjiang as a buffer zone to protect

May 15, 1981, 32-34; S. Enders Wimbush, "The China Story: Where Now Xinjiang?," *Islamic World Review*, 6:70 (1987), 5-9. For the perspective of Eastern Turkestan emigres, see Erkin Alptekin, "Eastern Turkestan After 32 Years of Exile," *Central Asian Survey*, 1:4 (1983), 149-153; Ghulamuddin Pahta, "The Changing Status of Turkic Muslims in China's Uighur Autonomous Region Traditionally Called 'Eastern Turkestan'," *Doghu Türkistan'in Sesi (Voice of Eastern Turkistan)*, 3:10 (1986), 48-56.

¹¹³ June Teufel Dreyer, "The Islamic Community of China," *Central Asian Survey*, 1:2/3 (1983), 47.

¹¹⁴ Alptekin, "Exile," 153.

¹¹⁵ Erkin Alptekin, "Relations Between Eastern and Western Turkestan," *Central Asia and Caucasus Chronicle*, 11; "Back-Door Trade," *Asiaweek*, July 22, 1988, 10.

themselves from the other. In addition, they both recognized the economic benefit of controlling the rich natural resources of the area. Although initially there may have been a legitimate concern on the part of the Soviets to extend Communism into Xinjiang, by the 1930s the expectation of an imminent World Revolution had been all but abandoned in the face of the need to build Socialism in the USSR. Thus, economic and strategic motives for controlling the province soon took priority over ideological ones.

What enabled the Soviets to so easily control Xinjiang during most of the Republican era, especially after the rise to power of Sheng Shicai? There are several apparent reasons. First, Xinjiang could not survive economically without trade with the USSR. The proximity of Soviet Central Asia and the common ethnic and cultural roots that Muslims on both sides of the border share made such trade inevitable. With trade came the opportunity for the Soviets to control the economy and hence the political structure of the province.

Second, the Republican government in Nanjing was too far away and too preoccupied with the Japanese invasion and the struggle with the CCP to be of much help to Xinjiang. When the inevitable internal upheavals arose, the government of Xinjiang had little choice but to turn to the Soviet Union in order to survive. Thus, the Soviets were able to intervene militarily in 1934, when Sheng was threatened by both the TIRET and the invading Dungans, and again in 1937, when the unrest in the south threatened to consume the whole province.

A third factor was the traditional influence that the Russians had exerted in the Ili Valley since their annexation of that territory in 1871. This remained an area in which they could count on local support for their plans right up until the end of the Republican era. Once Sheng made his break with the USSR in 1942, the northern region of the province continued to be an effective base of operations, from which they were able to assist Osman Batur in his fight against the provincial government in 1943 and to help establish the ETR in 1944.

Fourth, the deep ethnic divisions in Xinjiang also helped the Soviets in consolidating their power base in the province. Not only did the never-ending Muslim revolts give them a reason to intervene militarily, alternately on the side of both the government and the rebels, but the constant political instability that these insurrections produced guaranteed that there would be no one force strong enough to challenge Soviet power in Xinjiang. In addition, not only was there a strong antagonism between the Han Chinese and the Muslim population, but there were also deep-rooted divisions between the Chinese and Turkic Muslims. Furthermore, there were factions amongst the Turkic population of the province. In general, those in the south, around the Tarim Basin, were the most devoutly Muslim and therefore both

anti-Han and anti-Soviet. Their goal was consistently a secessionist Turkic-Islamic republic. Those living in the central portion of the province, around Urumchi, were the most accustomed to Chinese rule and not nearly so averse to it. So long as order was maintained, they were generally content to be governed by China. Finally, those living in the north were as antagonistic to Chinese rule as those in the south, but were much less serious in their devotion to Islam and either much more open to Russian influence, as in the Ili Valley, or primarily concerned with maintaining a nomadic lifestyle unhindered by any outside influences, as was the case amongst the Kazakhs of Jungaria. Thus, those in the north desired independence from Chinese rule, but they did not envision an independent Islamic state.¹¹⁶

A fifth and final factor which should not be overlooked is the personalities of the chief characters involved. The Han Chinese warlords were customarily corrupt, repressive, and motivated by greed and personal ambition. Their policies only served to alienate their Muslim subjects and further destabilize the province. In addition, the ambition of Sheng to rule at any cost left him open to being used by the Soviets to accomplish their agenda. Personal ambition also played a part in the actions of those who opposed the government, thus enabling them also to be easily manipulated by the Soviets. Although each had different reasons for doing so, this occurred with most of the major players in Republican Xinjiang, including Khoja Niyas Hajji, Ma Zhongying, and Osman Batur. The subsequent political maneuvering of Burhan Shahidi and Saifuddin Azizov, as they switched their allegiance from the GMD and the CPSU, respectively, to the CCP, shows that this tactic of political survival is still alive and well in Xinjiang.

¹¹⁶ See Forbes, *Warlords*, 229-234 for a discussion of this factor.

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