

SINKIANG TODAY

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CHINESE Turkistan or, as it is now called, Sinkiang (The New Dominion) is the most western province of China. It lies in the heart of Central Asia, where the frontiers meet not only of Tibet and Mongolia but also of India, the U.S.S.R. and China, three of the world's greatest empires. From time to time reports of battles and massacres in some obscure town on Sinkiang's undemarcated frontiers find their way into the world press: protests are issued from Nanking and counter protests from Moscow, followed by silence until the next incident. These reports are the ripples which reach the outside world of a centuries-old struggle for power in Asia between the Russians, the Chinese and, until recently, the Turks. Since the end of the nineteenth century the Turks have ceased to count as an independent force in Central Asia and, today, the two main contestants are the Russians and the Chinese, the British and the Indians being interested but inactive spectators.

In this struggle the possession of Sinkiang is of vital importance. For it is the key to China's back door—the Kansu corridor—down which in the past so many barbarian hordes from the barren plains of inner Asia have swept to over-run and lay waste the fertile lands and proud cities of China, and even today he who holds Sinkiang controls one of the main land invasion routes into China. Should the Soviets assert themselves in Sinkiang they will gain control not only of this land route but also of nearly 5 million Turkish Moslems living in the province. At the same time they will be able to influence the 12 million Tungans or Chinese Moslems living in north-west China. The Tungans are for the most part bitterly hostile to the Communists but they have long shown a strong tendency to separate from the Chinese Central Government. With encouragement from the Soviets they might be prepared to break right away; an event which would produce yet another threat to the independence of a free China. The Chinese Central Government realize the danger of this, and during the last five years have made considerable efforts to strengthen their hold in Sinkiang.

From the point of view of the Soviet Union, Sinkiang is the natural political and economic extension of her Asiatic republics and, in view of the considerable political discontent and economic suffering in these republics it is an important extension. In this age of atomic bombs and long range aircraft the Power which has the use of the airfields of Sinkiang would be able to strike at the most inaccessible industrial areas of Soviet Asia.

From the point of view of Britain, an increase of Soviet influence in any part of the world seems to be at present undesirable. A Soviet advance in Sinkiang would mean an increase of Soviet prestige in the Moslem world as a whole, and at the same time would provide a territorial base for Soviet

political penetration of Tibet and Kashmir, where the present civil war offers an excellent field for subversive activities.

Apart from Sinkiang's strategic importance there are three further reasons which make it of exceptional interest. The first is that Sinkiang is probably the only country in the world which has been for ten years behind the iron curtain of the Russians and then, in 1943, threw off the Soviet yoke. Today with the exception of the three northern districts Sinkiang is free from direct Soviet control. We can see what happened behind the curtain and observe the methods which the Soviets used to seize and consolidate power in a backward area in Asia. The second reason is that events in Sinkiang serve as an example of what may happen in other regions in Asia bordering on the Soviet frontier, such as Persian Azerbaijan, Afghan Turkistan, or Turkish Kurdistan. The third is that today there are signs that the Soviets are trying to co-ordinate the nationalist aspirations of the Central Asian Turkish races into a movement which can perhaps best be described as a modern version of the Pan-Turanian movement. From its impact on Sinkiang we can judge what effect such a movement might have on the Islamic world in general.

Sinkiang with about 700,000 square miles of territory is larger than Great Britain, France and Germany put together but it has a population of only some five million. Of these the Chinese number approximately 5 per cent and are today the rulers of the province; of the remainder, 80 per cent are Moslem Turks of Central Asian stock. The most numerous are the Uighur Turks, generally known as Turkis, who are a settled people living in the towns and oases. They are for the most part peasants, small landowners, petty merchants and artisans. The second most numerous are the nomadic Turkish tribes of the Kazakhs and the Kirghiz, who wander over the bare steppes of northern Sinkiang and along the wooded slopes of the Altai and Tien Shan mountains. They live off the produce of their vast herds of sheep, camels and horses. The settled and the nomadic peoples of Sinkiang are closely connected by language, race, religion, common tradition, and often by blood, to the Turks who form the bulk of the population of the Soviet Asiatic republics.

The wealth of Sinkiang consists primarily of livestock and foodstuffs in which the province is more or less self-supporting. There are, however, considerable mineral resources, including oil, gold, iron and tin. None of these have as yet been exploited on a commercial scale and the bulk of the people earn their living by farming and raising livestock, or by cottage industries and trading. It is difficult to estimate with accuracy the number of livestock in the province, but there are said to be some 10 million sheep, 2 million horses, 1 million goats, 1 million cattle and about $\frac{1}{2}$ million camels. The main exports are sheep, horses and cattle, furs and gold from the Altai, raw silk, carpets and *charas* (*hashish*) from Khotan, and raw wool and woollen felts from all over the province. The main imports are tea, sugar, spices, cloth, dyes, cotton piece goods, and all forms of cheap manufactured products. The Soviet Union is in a more favourable geographical position than either India or China to supply goods to Sinkiang at low prices and, during Tsarist

times, most of Sinkiang's trade was in Russian hands. After the 1917 revolution the chaos in the Soviet Union eliminated her as a trader and India was able between 1917 and 1927 to capture practically the whole of the Sinkiang market. By 1927, however, the Soviets had reorganized their own economy and increased the volume of their exports. There followed several years of lively economic rivalry between the two countries; in order to compete with Russian prices India was forced to buy goods from Japan and re-export them to Sinkiang, but Soviet economic influence continued to increase and was gradually eliminating that of India.

At this time the Governor of Sinkiang was an able and autocratic official of the Manchu dynasty, named Yang Tseng-hsin, who had ruled the province since 1911. In 1927 he was forced to make some economic concessions to the Soviets, but he prevented Soviet economic influence from developing into Soviet political domination. His attitude and the fact that he was suspected of aiding the *Basmatchis*, the anti-Communist guerrillas who were then active in Soviet Asia, displeased the Soviets and Governor Yang was assassinated in 1928 with the connivance, and possibly on the orders, of the Soviet Consul-General in Urumchi. Five confused and bloody years of rebellions and civil wars followed. Sinkiang became a battle-ground for the ambitions of Chinese and Tungan war-lords, fanatical *mullahs* (Moslem priests) and wild tribal chiefs. In most districts the Chinese were massacred and independent governments were set up, sometimes calling themselves republics, at other times calling themselves kingdoms, under an Emir. These states were often swept away within a few days of their formation, and another leader with the aid of a new faction or a fiercer tribe would seize power. Many towns and villages all over Sinkiang were looted and burned. The whole country-side was plundered by marauding bands and the irrigation canals, vitally important to the agriculture of the province, were neglected and fell into disuse. By the end of 1932 Sinkiang was rapidly dissolving into anarchy.

In the early nineteen-thirties the Soviets were apprehensive of the advance westwards of Japanese military imperialism. In 1931 the Japanese had occupied Manchuria, in 1933 they were in control of the five north-eastern provinces of China, and by the end of the year had penetrated as far south and west as Kansu. The Soviet Government feared that the Japanese or the British might encourage the rebellions in Sinkiang to spread across the border into the Soviet Asiatic republics, where they could link up with the *Basmatchis* in an attempt to overthrow Soviet power in Asia. Because of this and possibly also because they wished to balance their Central Asian economy, especially in regard to livestock, which had become severely depleted during the over-hasty attempts at collectivization in Kazakhstan, the Soviets decided in 1933, to intervene in Sinkiang. They made contact with Shen-Shih-tsai, a Chinese general commanding the local garrison, and supplied arms and money to suppress a Moslem revolt. They also organized a military force of about one thousand men from among the Chinese troops which had previously fled from the Japanese invasion of Manchuria and were living as

refugees in the U.S.S.R. They sent this force into Sinkiang to co-operate with Shen-Shih-tsai who himself was a Chinese from Manchuria.

Shen-Shih-tsai defeated the Moslem rebels, and eliminated the Chinese Central Government's influence in Sinkiang, and by 1934 was settling down to consolidate his power under Soviet guidance. Shen-Shih-tsai based his rule on "six great principles of Government":

- (i) Anti-imperialism
- (ii) Kinship to Sovietism
- (iii) Racial equality
- (iv) Clean government
- (v) Peace
- (vi) Reconstruction

The application of these principles in a primitive Moslem country like Sinkiang required the backing of a strong secret police and an army, and a certain measure of expert Soviet advice. The army, in the main, consisted of Manchurian troops owing personal loyalty to Shen-Shih-tsai, which perhaps explains why he was allowed by the Soviets to remain in power for so long.

Although Shen-Shih-tsai's rule was oppressive, it was more efficient than the régime set up by the Chinese Central Government on their return in 1944. Shen-Shih-tsai with Soviet help carried out many reforms. Communications were developed, roads, bridges and airfields were built by Soviet engineers. The army and police were modernized under Soviet experts, forts and barracks were erected, several middle-schools and over 200 primary schools were opened. A college of Law and Political Science was founded in Urumchi. Preliminary instruction in medical, veterinary and technical subjects was introduced into the curriculum of the college. The instruction was run on Soviet lines with Soviet style text-books written in the local Turki language. Great attention was given to Marxist ideology and anti-imperialist propaganda. The advanced students were sent to Tashkent and Alma Ata for technical and other specialized training. Many of them appeared to have been impressed by what they had seen in the Soviet Union, and were on the whole inclined to be pro-Soviet in their sympathies. Games and all forms of cultural activities, such as the theatre, cinema, national dances and music were encouraged. These latter activities were carried on in the *Uyushmas* or cultural clubs which were opened in each town. These clubs became the centres of Soviet propaganda and proved a great help in increasing Soviet influence. The smoking of hashish and opium was forbidden but drinking *araq* and vodka was encouraged, probably in order to undermine Moslem traditions. Women were forbidden to wear veils and were encouraged to behave in as an emancipated way as possible. The rate of literacy in the Province rose rapidly and for a country as backward as Sinkiang, the number of simple townspeople of the younger generation who can read is high.

At the same time the Soviets tried to liquidate the remnants of the

"reactionary" Moslem and nationalist leaders in Sinkiang, some of whom were refugees from Soviet Asia. They also tried to destroy the power of Islam. The Mosques were closed or converted into clubs and theatres. The *mullahs* were publicly ridiculed and persecuted. The Soviets must have underestimated the strength of the religious feeling in Sinkiang, for their policy aroused strong hostility among the people. A Turki-Tungan alliance resulted in a full-scale rebellion in southern Sinkiang in 1937. The Tungans under Ma Ho-san and the Turkis under General Mahmoud Shejang, a rich Turki merchant who was military commander in Kashgar, seized Kashgar and Yarkand. Many Chinese and pro-Soviet Turkis were killed. It is widely believed that the British encouraged this revolt, for the rebels were certainly pro-British and many British subjects of Indian nationality took part. The revolt was finally squashed with open Soviet intervention at the beginning of 1938. Ma Ho-san and Mahmoud Shejang fled to India; the latter went on to Japan where he worked for the Japanese during the last war.

From 1937 onwards there was a general increase of Soviet control over Sinkiang with the corresponding purges. This was probably a counter measure to the Japanese attack on Shanghai on August 13, 1937. Many of the local people fled; thousands more were imprisoned or simply disappeared. The stories were usually identical. In the middle of the night, the police came into the home, took away for interrogation the father, son or brother of the house who was never heard of again. The Soviets were particularly aggressive against British subjects and the H.B.M. Consular staff. Their methods varied from mild devices such as the encouragement of school children to spit, throw stones and shout insults, to imprisonment, torture or the complete disappearance of British subjects. Many of them had their lands and goods confiscated; others were deported at twenty-four hours' notice in mid-winter across the mountains to India.

The purges in Sinkiang were synchronized with similar purges within the Soviet Union. These purges may have been caused in part by fear of Germany in the west and Japan in the east. In Moscow the Bukharin trials resulted in the liquidation of the left and right deviationists within the Communist Party. There were mass arrests and executions in Soviet Asia. Among others Faizeilla Khodjaev, the President of Uzbekistan, and many members of the Central Committee of the Uzbek Communist Party, as well as nearly half the Uzbek Government, were found to be bourgeois nationalists at heart, and to have been working against the policy laid down by the Central Committee in Moscow. In Sinkiang many of the Turki and Uzbek leaders, including landowners, officials and *mullahs* were arrested and disappeared.

The Soviets also adopted a more forward policy towards the nomads whom they tried to bring directly under government control. To escape this interference, a large group of Kazakhs numbering some 18,000 souls moved out of the north-west corner of Sinkiang with their flocks and tents to start on a five-year trek to India. They marched and fought their way for nearly five thousand miles across western China and Tibet to arrive in 1942, on the

frontiers of Kashmir, numbering some 3,000 souls. The remnants are today scattered through many of the towns of Northern India, where they earn their living by making lambskin caps which they sell in the local bazaars.

By the end of 1938 the power of the last independent Moslem and Turki leaders was broken. Specifically anti-religious propaganda then slackened, while anti-British and anti-imperialist propaganda increased. Soviet influence had by then become so strong that they were able to start undermining Shen-Shih-tsai's position. They probably intended to replace him with one of their Soviet trained Uzbeks or Turkis. An increased number of Turki, Uzbek and Tartar police and army officers were sent to the Soviet Union for special training. After they had been trained the Soviets ensured that they were placed in key positions in Sinkiang. Uzbek and Tartar Communists and agents were sent into Sinkiang from the Soviet Union with instructions to make propaganda, strengthening the feeling of national and cultural kinship between the Turkish peoples of Sinkiang and those of Soviet Central Asia. Shen-Shih-tsai realized that the Soviets were undermining his position, and attempted to counteract this by carrying out frequent executions of suspected persons within his entourage. He continued, however, to lose ground to the Communists and began looking for outside support to help him maintain his power.

In 1942, when the Soviet Union was hard pressed by the Germans, Shen-Shih-tsai was persuaded by the Chinese General commanding North-West China, and later by Madame Chiang Kai-shek, who flew to Urumchi in the summer of 1942, that the Soviets were on the verge of collapse and that he had better transfer once more his allegiance to the Chinese Central Government. They must have convinced him that if he did this, his past faults would be forgiven and he would be allowed to remain in control of the Province. As a result, between 1942-4 Soviet influence was gradually eliminated, under pressure from Shen-Shih-tsai. In the spring of 1943, the Soviet advisers and trade agencies disappeared and the Soviet regiments stationed at Ili and Hami were withdrawn. Inter-communication and trade between Sinkiang and the Soviet Union was brought to a standstill.

In August 1944, the Chinese Central Government felt themselves strong enough to dispense with the help of Shen-Shih-tsai. He was recalled to Chungking where he was appointed Minister for Agriculture, a post he held for a short period before disappearing from the political arena into the Castle at Kweilin, where he was a fellow guest with the young Marshal Chang Hsieh-liang of Manchuria. Today Shen-Shih-tsai is reported to have arrived in Sian, in Shensi province, but his future plans are unknown. It is difficult to estimate his chance of staging a political comeback. Shen-Shih-tsai is intelligent, energetic and not lacking in courage. Those who meet him are impressed by his distinguished appearance, his good manners and his considerable personal charm. He is at the same time very ambitious, cruel and ruthless; he suffers from persecution mania, and in his grim, fortress-like palace in Urumchi, surrounded by his bodyguard, he always insisted on preparing

his own food to avoid the risk of poison. It is said that he was never a member of the Communist Party, but that he merely worked closely with the Soviets for the purpose of strengthening his own personal rule in Sinkiang. Violent propaganda by both the Kuomintang and the Soviets has today succeeded in discrediting Shen-Shih-tsai among the people of Sinkiang, and his personal influence has gone. The influence of his ten-year pro-Soviet régime, however, still remains. The Soviets have succeeded to a great extent in disassociating themselves from Shen himself, while retaining their connection in the minds of the people with much that was popular in his régime.

Between 1943 and 1945 the Chinese increased their garrison in Sinkiang by moving reinforcements up from Kansu. There were purges of doubtful elements in the army, the police and the civil administration, and the secret police were active in arranging the disappearance of pro-Soviet persons. The British and American Governments were able to open Consulates in Urumchi and all visible signs of Soviet influence disappeared. The Chinese became once more the rulers of Sinkiang, in fact, as well as in name.

In 1944, when the tide of war on the Western front was running in their favour, the Soviets turned their eyes once more to the east, and their attitude towards China and Japan stiffened. In Sinkiang this resulted in a revolt of the Kazakhs in February 1944, which was followed in November by a rising in the Ili valley. The local Chinese civilians and the government troops were driven eastwards, and by the end of the year the rebels had set up an independent "Republic of Eastern Turkistan" embracing Ili, Altai, and Chugachek, the three most northern of Sinkiang's ten districts. The rebels formed a Government in Ili with an administrative system, collected taxes, published their own newspapers and propaganda, and tried to form a disciplined army. At first they encouraged the Islamic way of life and proclaimed a *Jihad* or Holy War against the infidel Chinese. Later, however, they abandoned their pro-Islamic propaganda and tried to promote the growth of a Central Asian Turkish "National Liberation Movement." The exact role of the Soviets is not clear but they seem not only to have given support to the rebels after the rising, but also to have helped organize the original outbreaks from the sanctuary of their Consulates in Ili and Chugachek.

From the winter of 1944 until the autumn of 1945 the situation in Sinkiang remained unchanged. In the north, there was some fighting but the rebels made no serious attempt to advance, while in the south, several raids into the Chinese Pamirs were made by bands of cavalry operating from bases within the Soviet Union.

In the autumn of 1945 the rebels made another bid for power—which was co-ordinated with, and similar in many ways, to the rebellion in Azerbaijan—but in Sinkiang the *coup* was made without the aid of the Red Army. The Soviet plan was to push forward well-armed groups of cavalry to seize strategic points. These groups operated from their base in Ili, or in some cases direct from bases within the Soviet Union. After capturing the strategic points the Soviets probably intended to set up operational and supply centres

which would act as a nucleus for a general rising of the local Turkish population against the Chinese. The Soviet Consulates in Urumchi and elsewhere and Communist agents must have sent back exaggerated reports of the revolutionary situation in Sinkiang much in the same way as the Soviet Consulate-General in Tabriz appears to have done. In fact, the local population of Sinkiang failed to rise. They remained inactive and displayed no desire to risk their lives and property in the interests of the Soviets. On the other hand, they did not help the Chinese, whose rule many of them considered to be corrupt and inefficient.

In the north, rebel columns pushed forward to Mannas, a town within 100 kilometres of Urumchi, while small bands raided even farther east and tried to cut the road connecting Urumchi with central China. In the south, rebel bands poured through the passes leading from the Soviet Union to the Pamirs and drove out the Chinese garrison. For nearly a year they succeeded in closing both routes to India, advanced almost to the gates of Kashgar, and besieged Yarkand for several months.

The rebel advance both in the north and south was halted by the end of 1945. The Chinese Government which was in difficulties with the Communists in northern and central China decided to negotiate with the rebels in Sinkiang. General Chang Chih-chung, newly appointed general commanding the 8th War Zone of North-west China, started negotiations with the Ili rebels through the intermediary of the Soviet Consul-General in Urumchi. After seven months' bargaining an agreement was concluded between the Chinese Government and the Ili rebels in 1946. The rebels recognized Chinese suzerainty and the right of the Chinese Central Government to dispose troops for the protection of Sinkiang's frontiers from external aggression. In return the Chinese gave the rebels a wide measure of autonomy, which included the right to raise and officer six native regiments for purposes of internal security, and the right to elect all members of the district councils and fifteen out of twenty members of the Provincial Government. The Chinese kept their part of the agreement and free elections were held late in 1946. The elected representatives, who were mainly native Turkis, took their place in the Provincial Government. The rebels, however, failed to keep their part and, so far, no Central Government troops have entered the three northern districts of Sinkiang, which still remain in rebel hands and under Soviet control. In the south, however, the Chinese troops cleared the rebels out of the Pamirs and opened both routes to India.

In Sinkiang at this time most of the leading natives were opposed to the Chinese and styled themselves "Nationalists." Among them were included both the leaders of the Ili rebels and more moderate persons. Under pressure from extremist elements supported by the Soviets, the Nationalists organized a violent anti-Chinese campaign of fiery speeches, strikes and hostile demonstrations. Skilful and up-to-date propaganda was supplied by the Soviet Consulates. As a result the Nationalists succeeded in obtaining from the Chinese considerable influence over the appointment of all provincial officials

and in the day-to-day administration of the Province. By 1947, the Chinese although they had increased the number of their troops in Sinkiang to approximately 100,000 men, were politically on the retreat.

Today the extreme group of the Nationalists is pressing for immediate autonomy for Sinkiang. This group is headed by such men as Ahmed Jan Kasimof and Rahim Jan Sabir, who until recently were members of the Provincial Government, but have now gone into opposition and retired to their base in Ili, where they are probably preparing a second push on the lines of their last attempt in the autumn of 1945. The extremist leaders are supported by their own troops in Ili and, in other parts of Sinkiang, by many of the junior Turki officials in the civil administration, police and army. These officials regret the loss of the power and privileges they enjoyed under the régime of Shen-Shih-tsai and are still pro-Soviet. The extremists are also followed by many of the schoolmasters, doctors, mechanics and the "lower middle class" such as it exists in Sinkiang. Their propaganda lays stress on the "national" and cultural connection between the Turks of Sinkiang and the Turks of the neighbouring Soviet Socialist republics. It points out that autonomy for Sinkiang will mean immediate freedom from the corrupt Chinese rule, and will eventually lead to the introduction of modern Soviet "culture" in the form of cheap cigarettes, flashy clothes, strong vodka, cinemas and "socialist" inventions, such as the machine tractor and the combined harvester. Their propaganda appeals to the pleasure-loving and materialistic side of the Turki character, and has had considerable success, especially among the younger people in the towns.

The right-wing of the Nationalist group is headed by the more conservative leaders such as Mahmoud Sabri, Burkhan, Mohomed Amin, the ex-Emir of Khotan and the *mullahs*, who have not forgotten their persecution in the past by the Soviets and today are alarmed at the increase of Soviet influence in the nationalist movement. This group is conservative and Islamic in character, but its political activities are as yet unco-ordinated. They rely on the religious and traditional feelings of a proud but backward people, and have considerable support from the peasants and some of the nomads, the wealthier townspeople and the older generation of all classes. The Chinese are encouraging its growth, with the result that once again the old Islamic customs are returning to Sinkiang for the first time in more than ten years. The women hidden under their thick veils can again be seen scurrying through the streets of the towns, the mosques have been re-opened and the drinking of alcohol is discouraged. Today the Nationalists have split into two definite factions, the right-wing pro-Chinese Islamic group, and the left-wing pro-Soviet Nationalist group. Without outside interference the Islamic group is probably the stronger of the two, but the future of Sinkiang will be decided by the amount of pressure which the Chinese Central Government or the Soviet Government can bring to bear on the Province. The Soviets are geographically and economically in a more favourable position to do this than are the Chinese, and unless the anti-Soviet forces in Sinkiang can be supported from

outside it seems likely that Sinkiang will once more pass into Soviet control.

The Governments of Turkey and the Soviet Union realize the significance of the growth of the Turkish nationalist movement in Sinkiang and its relationship with Islam. For there are Moslem Turkish races living not only in Sinkiang itself but also on both sides of the Soviet frontier, practically the whole way from the Dobrudja in Bulgaria to the borders of Mongolia. They number nearly 50 million, of whom about 16 million live in Turkey; 19 million in the Soviet Union; over 5 million in Iran; 1 million in Afghanistan; and nearly 5 million in Sinkiang. Except for the Turks of Turkey none are independent and most of them are under foreign and often oppressive rulers; today their national consciousness has been awakened, and in many places the growth of an organized Nationalist movement is taking place. Just as in Europe much of Soviet political strength comes from Pan-Slavism linked with Moscow by forms of neo-Communist, neo-Fascist Parties, so in Central Asia today there are signs that the Soviets are trying to create a Pan-Turanian movement linked with Moscow through similar parties. The difference between the subdivisions of the Turkish race in Asia is no greater than that between the various groups of the Slav peoples in Europe; and should the Soviets succeed in their policy of co-ordinating the Nationalist aspirations of the various Turkish races into a Pan-Turanian movement they will have a powerful weapon in the Middle East and Central Asia.

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