

The 1933 Uprising

Soviet-Chinese Collaboration in Eastern Turkistan

Ghulamuddin Patha

The recent thaw in relations between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) has clearly shown that they have some mutual interests and common goals. One of the concerns is their shared worry over the Islamic nationalism that has emerged on Russian controlled land inhabited by various turkic ethnic groups in Western Turkistan. Among these groups are people from Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Qazaqistan, Qirghizistan, and Tajikistan. Land occupied by the Chinese on the other side of the border, Sinkiang or Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (formerly known as Eastern Turkistan), also borders ethnic groups which have inherited the same historical, cultural, Islamic, and Turkic linguistic past as western Turkistan.¹

Presently, Turkic nationalism and Muslim revivalism have been sweeping through the Soviet Central Asian republics, mainly Western Turkistan. Although Beijing has maintained over the rise of Islamic nationalism in north-western PRC, the Chinese leadership clearly fears that this contagion could spread into the PRC, especially into Eastern Turkistan, which has already been torn by deep political divisions. These political divisions have resulted in an uprising of the Uighurs, Qazaqs, Qirghiz,

Uzbeks and a few others, all of them Turkic people, in East Turkistan. Events of this period are reminiscent of the 1933 Soviet-Chinese collaboration, for history is repeating itself once more.

Today's political situation in Eastern Turkistan remains the same, but in reality, it's totally different than in 1933. In the past, Eastern and Western Turkistan was completely isolated from the free world as a 'land-locked' country; they were cut-off both physically and morally from the world. However, this situation does not exist anymore.

Even though the Soviet and Chinese governments had tightly controlled Turkistan, news of events in the country still leaked to the free world. For instances, *The Wall Street Journal* wrote an article on July 17, 1990 titled, "Soviet China shares a fear: Islam." "Uniting popular front movements in Uzbekistan, which now has a membership of well over a half a million... Chinese intelligence claims to have identified no less than seven separate organizations in the Xinjiang (E. Turkistan) province." Furthermore, the international news magazine, *Newsweek*, published in its special "Earth day '90" issue, April 23, 1990, a four page report on Eastern Turkistan titled, "The other China, Minorities are rising to challenge Beijing as Muslims run riot in the West." They described the pre-

sent situation in Turkistan under the subtitle, "Han Chinese go home! Two cultures clash bloodily in old Kashgar."

The similarity of the 1933 uprising to today's situation is that the Soviet and Chinese governments have collaborated again against th movements of freedom and independence in Eastern Turkistan. In fact, the Chairman of the regional advisory committee in Xinjiang's (Eastern Turkistan) capital in Urumchi, Wang Enmao, had said in an interview published in November 1988's *Shanghai Information Digest* that "the aim of an 'independence movement' was to set up an 'Eastern Turkistan party' for the independence of Xinjiang." He was also quoted to have said that "they want to establish an independent country and separate Xinjiang from the mother-country." Also, Mr. Wang Enmao had said that unofficial reports have been circulating in Beijing indicating that the Soviet Union had helped the Chinese to uncover the secessionist groups.²

The tension between the two communist giants which has lasted about 30 years began to abate last year with Mikhail S. Gorbachev's visit to the U.S. Li Peng's visit to Moscow in April was the first visit there in 25 years of a Chinese Prime Minister. Accompanying him in this historical first was the Chairman of the Government of Xinjiang Uighur

throwing the old-fashioned bureaucratic, imperialistic system and established a new national government.

The 'Islamic Republic of Eastern Turkistan' (IRET) was officially proclaimed on November 10, 1933 in Kashgar where a new flag bearing a blue colour with a crescent and star rose in Kashgar's sky for the first time.⁹ As further symbols of sovereignty, this new government, IRET, also issued its official paper currency and silver and copper coins. (These coins and the national flag are here in the seminar room for anyone interested in seeing them.) But that sovereignty was limited.

Islamic Republic (IRET)

Khoja Niyaz Haji was selected as the president of the IRET from its cabinet of 16 members and Sabit Damulla Abdalbaki became the Prime Minister. The 30-paragraph constitution of the IRET had been prepared and outlined by a specially commissioned 'independence committee' and was officially presented on December 3rd, 1933 in Kashgar.¹⁰

However, the economic and political situation of this region was very complicated and unstable, even more so with the Tungan and Han Chinese opposing the IRET along with Sheng Shih-ts'ai's military regime. Although the IRET had problems of its own, Sheng Shih-ts'ai had his share as well. The position his military power fought to gain in the Islamic Republic's capital city of Urumchi was weakening. In light of this fact, the leaders of IRET were left with no choice but to seek military aid from the Soviet Union.

The Islamic Republic of Eastern Turkistan also sought help for



Eastern Turkistan: A constant struggle between its two giant neighbours, China and Russia.

recognition in its struggle for independence from British India and the Muslim Middle-East countries. Unlike Yakub Beg Atalik Gazi who had succeeded in winning support from the British and Ottoman Turkey, the IRET failed in its search for support for several reasons.¹¹

First, the 'great powers' were not informed well enough about the international situation; therefore, serious steps to gain recognition for IRET's independence were not encouraged. Secondly, the Soviet Union steadily pressed the President of the IRET, Khoja Niyaz Haji, and the Defense Minister of the IRET, General Mahmud Muhiti, to abandon the Independence Proclamation and terminate the newly established government. In fact, the Soviet Union had frequently requested that Khoja Niyaz Haji arrest and deliver Prime Minister Sabit Abdalbaki to Sheng Shih-ts'ai,¹²

which was eventually accomplished. Finally, IRET's failure to gain support was also due to the lack of nationwide communication, difficulties in traveling and, transportation problems that ensued from continuous blood-shed in some regions, including that among the various ethnic groups themselves. These conditions gave Sheng Shih-ts'ai an opportunity to regain his sequestered position in Urumchi.

As a young man of Manchurian origin, Sheng Shih-ts'ai came to Eastern Turkistan as a professional officer toward the end of 1932. He had received his military education in China and Japan, and took part in the Northern Expedition which carried the Chinese Nationalists to victory in the Civil War of 1926-1927.

As a Marxist, Sheng Shih-ts'ai collaborated with the Russian and Chinese leaders, and commanded more than a thousand

Autonomous Region and Vice General Secretary, Timur Davamet, an Uighur, of the Communist Party. In fact, another first in Chinese history occurred when an Turkic-Muslim and a Chinese-Han leader accompanied the leaders on the Soviet visit.

If we follow the history of the movement for freedom and independence in the past century in Eastern and Western Turkistan (together known as Great Turkistan), we can clearly see that any political change occurring on one side of the border effects the other. This is because the same ethnic group on both sides want freedom and independence in Turkistan.

Chinese expansion

Geography prevents the expansion of the Chinese empire to the east across the interfering Pacific Ocean. China expanded westward where, between the first century B.C. and the eighth century C.E., China attacked Eastern Turkistan nine times and organized nine great drives. However, small forces of Turkic warriors met every advance with resistance and stopped and drove the Chinese armies back to the mainland. The Manchu Empire finally succeeded in reigning over Eastern Turkistan only after the death of Yakub Beg Atalik Gazi in 1877 under the rule of Chinese General Tso Tsung-t'ang's army.³ The Manchu Empire, led by the talents of Tso Tsung-t'ang, was not only able to retain military control over Eastern Turkistan but was also able to reassert permanent Chinese imperial authority by renaming the country "Sinkiang" without recognizing either its Islamic or Turkic character.

By 1877-1878, Chinese control had virtually reached all parts of the country, particularly in East-

ern Turkistan.⁴ But even after the conclusion of Tso's military campaigns in the Tarim Basin, there were debates among high officials and members of the Imperial Courts about the status of the conquered region. Seven years later, on November 18, 1884, an Imperial Edict, strongly supported by Tso Tsung-t'ang's, was issued by the Manchu Empire. It made Sinkiang (Eastern Turkistan) the nineteenth province of China.⁵

New name: Eastern Turkistan

The name 'Sinkiang' or in the Chinese, 'Hsin-Chiang' spelled presently as *Xinjiang*, is defined as *the new territory* or as commonly translated *the new dominion*. The late Chinese Premier, Chou En-Lai, even defined Sinkiang as *the new land*.⁶ This new name adopted by the Chinese proves that Eastern Turkistan was not a part of China prior to its annexation in 1884, but was occupied and renamed. Thus, by using the name Xinjiang the Chinese government admits to the fact that the region had been occupied by the People's Republic of China.

In fact, Eastern Turkistan is almost cut off geographically from the rest of China by towering mountains and deserts. Ethnically, the population of Eastern Turkistan consists mainly of Turkic Muslims, such as the Uighurs, Qazaqs, Kirghiz, Uzbeks, Tatars, Tajiks, and other nationalities.

Eastern Turkistan is well known as a 'land-locked' country because of its constant struggle between two giant countries, Russia and China. Its land is also very rich in oil, coal, iron, gold, silver, copper, uranium, and titanium. There are also precious stones such as rubies, emeralds, and diamonds, which were recently discovered. Although, the land is abundant in a wealth of

minerals and other materials, Eastern Turkistan's people are very poor. In addition, the Russian-Chinese Imperial boundary dividing Turkistan in two has remained essentially unchanged since 1888, although there have been many periods of Russian interference with Eastern Turkistan.

The 1933 Uprising

As once acknowledged by Mao Tse Tung himself, "it is known that in spite of all that has been done by the Communist Chinese, the people of Eastern Turkistan have never accepted Chinese rule and have always rebelled." However, more than one hundred of Eastern Turkistan's revolts were extinguished by blood and fire. These revolts indicate that the occupation of a country forces discrimination to occur over its people; without justice or equality of rights, how can rebellions be unavoided?

Eastern Turkistan has always been governed by the Chinese in true colonial style, that is, the Chinese or Manchus stood in the position of highest authority and representatives of local nobility in the lower echelons of power.⁷ In fact, the principle issue of Eastern Turkistan has always been China's goal to develop the area economically and to assimilate non-Han, that is, non-Chinese minorities, into Chinese Culture.

The rebellion originally started on February 20, 1931 in Suyol, a district of Araturuk township of the city of Qumul, northwest of Eastern Turkistan.⁸ The rebellion, which was led by Khoja Niyaz, born in 1889 in Qumul, is one of the most famous although most disastrous rebellions in Eastern Turkistan's history. The uprising cost the lives of several hundred thousand people. However, it was successful in over-

troops that reached Urumchi, the capital of Eastern Turkistan, from Manchuria.¹³ The Manchus soliders were men from the Manchurian province and were not Muslims. Furthermore, their loyalty to Sheng Shih-ts'ai was far greater than for any other officer and because of this, they were counted on to resist the rebels in Urumchi.¹⁴ Although the troops were more successful than expected, they had to overcome many strong points.

Relations with the Soviet Union

Upon Sheng Shih-ts'ai's arrival in Urumchi, several meetings were arranged with Soviet Consul Zelatkin in order to agree upon some mutual interests. Zelatkin had sent a telegram to Moscow to introduce Sheng Shih-ts'ai a man who had accepted Leninism and Communism, and also to suggest that Moscow send some military aid to help fight the uprisings in the Urumchi region. Soon after, Moscow sent a request on October 1933 that Sheng Shih-ts'ai send his top envoys, Cheng Deley and Yao Sheng. These ambassadors, with Sheng Shih-ts'ai's authorization, remained in the Soviet Union for more than two months negotiating a new agreement. As a result, Garegin Apresoff was appointed as the new Soviet Consul General to Urumchi and returned there with Urumchi's two envoys.

While these negotiations were taking place, the Tungans, Chinese Muslims lead by General Ma Chung-Ying, were fighting against Sheng Shih-ts'ai's troops. In spite of this fact, General Ma Chung-Ying, a Chinese, did not unite with Turkistan's Turkic Muslims to oppose Chinese and Russian efforts to destory the Islamic Republic of Eastern Turkistan. The fighting continued and eventually lead Sheng Shih-ts'ai and Garegin to discuss the

While these negotiations were taking place, the Tungans, Chinese Muslims led by General Ma Chung-Ying, were fighting against Sheng Shih-ts'ai's troops. In spite of this fact, General Ma Chung-Ying, a Chinese, did not unite with Turkistan's Turkic Muslims to oppose Chinese and Russian efforts to destory the Islamic Republic of Eastern Turkistan.

matter of Sheng Shih-ts'ai's unsteady position in Urumchi.

But in September of 1934, a business expert from the Soviet Union and a Mr. Vanij from the foreign trade department in Moscow arrived in Eastern Turkistan to aid in the matters of Sheng Shih-ts'ai's shaky position. After two months of investigation and hard work, the Moscow delegation finally reached the following 'six point secret agreement' involving the Soviet Union's assistance.¹⁵

1. The Soviet Union will provide the necessary military aid and equipment in order to help Sinkiang suppress the turmoil of the independence movements. Expenses would be cut from Sheng Shih-ts'ai's credit from the Soviet Union only on the condition that Sinkiang follow the ways of Communism Marxism in this region.
2. Industrialization of Sinkiang as well as all others areas of development.
3. The Sinkiang government will invite and accept the advice of Soviet advisors and technical experts for all major developmental areas, including the construction of important government offices.
4. Any relations with foreign countries (including Mainland China) are subject to approval through the specially appointed (Soviet) representative, Apresoff.
5. Any action taken to appoint or to dismiss important personnel in Sinkiang, the government of Sheng Shih-ts'ai must also consult with Apresoff and accept his suggestions.

6. The Soviet Union will give 5 million rubles in financial assistance to Sinkiang. This credit will have a 5-year term with interest off 4 percent and can be payable by various local production exchanges.

Sheng Shih-ts'ai had to accept this six-point 'secret agreement' not only to survive but to win the struggle within Urumchi against powerful enemies that were gaining the advantage. He also had strongly expressed both the desire to remain allied with the Soviet Union and the willingness to establish Communism in this region. In the 12 years as the dominant ruler in Eastern Turkistan, Sheng Shih-ts'ai had secretly visited Moscow only once and had become a member of the Communist Party.

Delegation to Soviet Union

In the latter part of January 1934, the IRET sent five representatives to the Soviet Union. Among the delegation sent to Tashkent was the Chief, Musul Haji, who was the elder brother of General Mahmut Muhiti, Defense Minister of the IRET, and the Deputy Chief, Ahmet Pahta, my father. Their mission was to:

1. Persuade the Soviet government to recognize the Islamic Republic of Eastern Turkistan as an official government.
2. Purchase military equipment and hardware.
3. Sign a trade agreement with the Soviet Union.

Surprisingly, in Tashkent the delegation was given the red carpet treatment with honours and ceremonies, and was met with unusual friendliness. In fact, my father used to tell me the story that when he had gone to Tashkent, formal attire for the ceremonies consisted of black coat-tails and top hats, which he thought were the funniest things he ever wore.

(To be continued)