

# Urumchi: Capital of Chinese Turkestan

by MILDRED CABLE

*The city of Urumchi, important though it has been for generations as a centre of the caravan trade of Central Asia, has remained all but unknown to the Western World until recently. Miss Mildred Cable, part author of The Gobi Desert, and one of the few Englishwomen who have ever ventured into this remote region where Russian and Chinese power reach out towards one another, gives an account in this article of life in the city today against its historical background*

CHINESE Turkestan is a vast territory embracing deserts, mountain ranges and strange rivers which rush with torrential force from the glaciers above, tear their way through the sand and grit, then bury themselves in some desolate salt-ringed swamp. It also contains a large number of small oases and a few big towns, lying at great distances from each other but linked by the ancient and historic trade-routes of Central Asia.

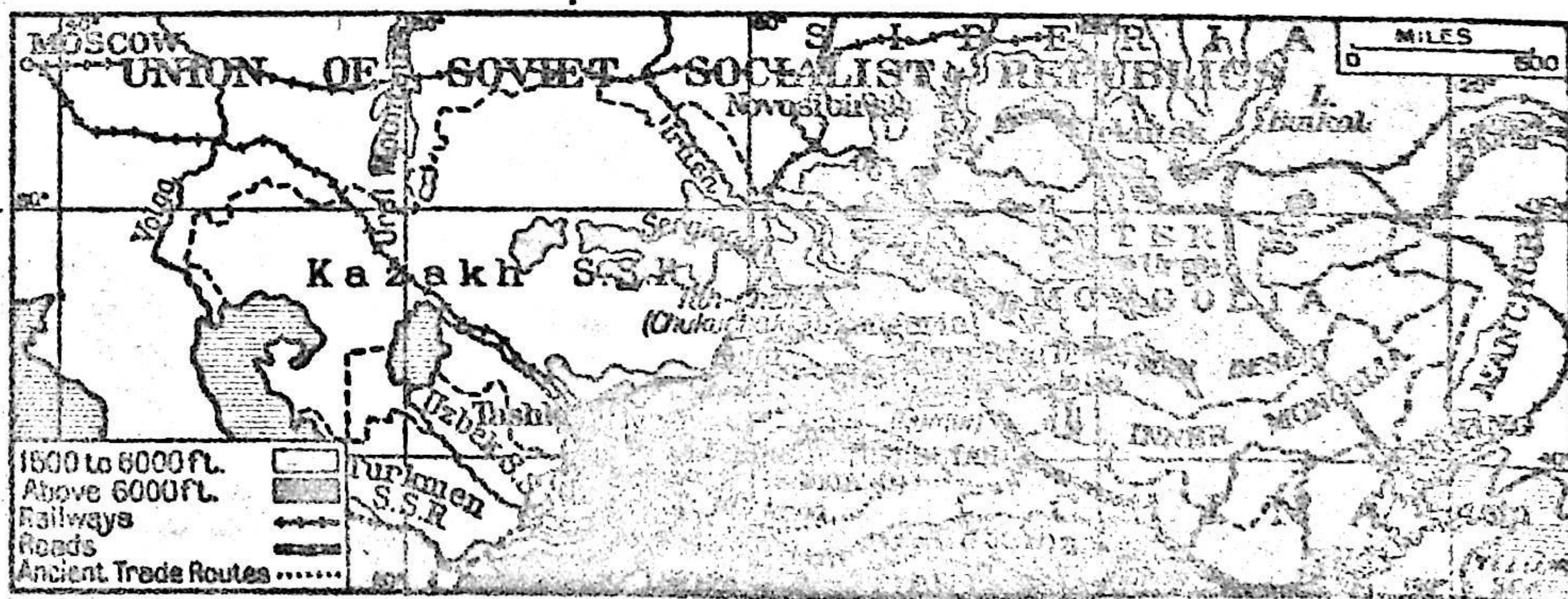
The inhabitants of these towns supply a key to the historical background of the country and, while I was living among them, a whole picture of bygone days re-formed itself in my mind.

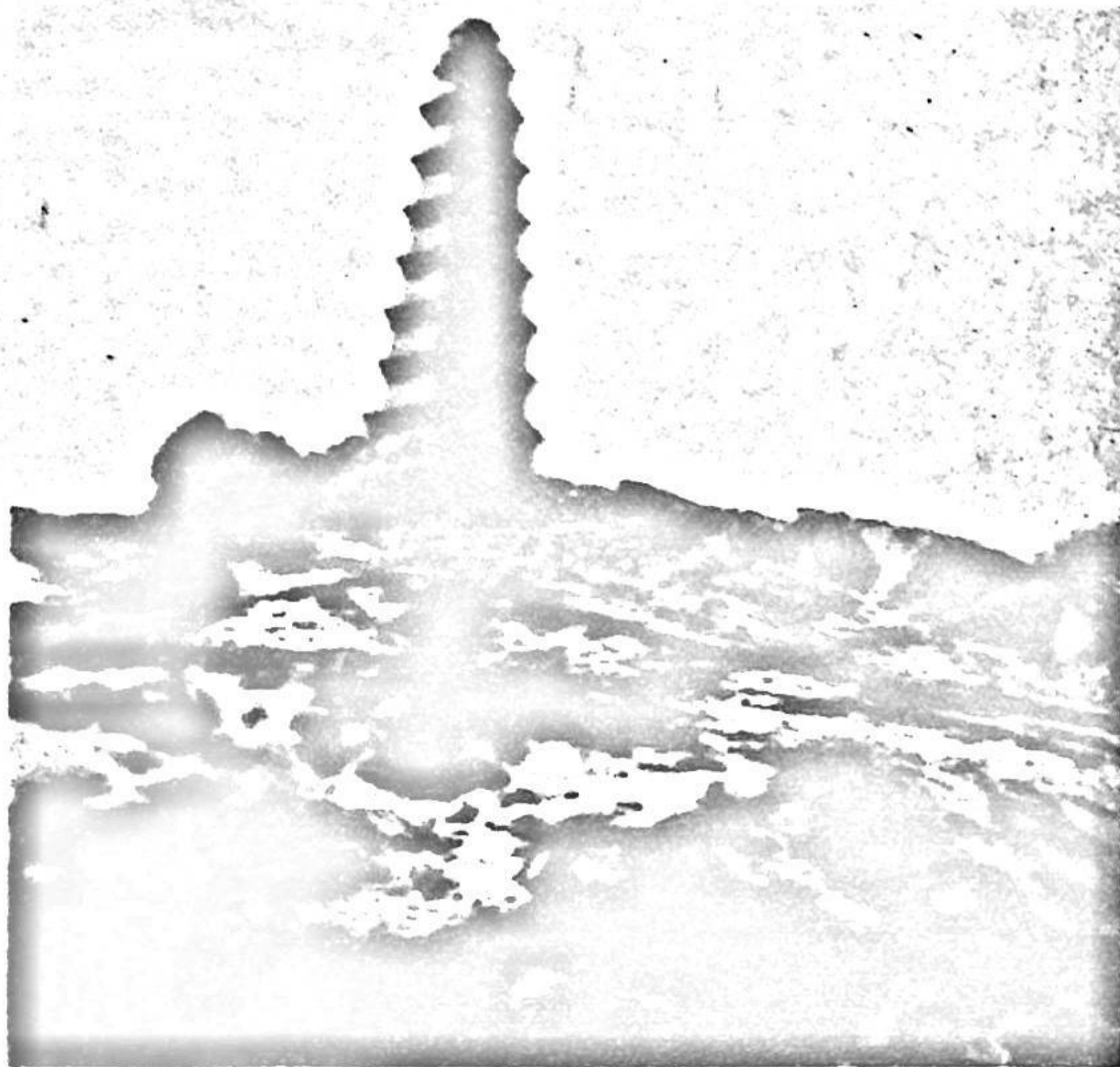
The men of the oases are descendants of ancient war-like tribes who perpetually disturbed the less sturdy nations, seized their territory and drove them westwards. One horde after another thus swept over the area north and south of the Tianshan and held the oases, the pasture-lands and the caravan

routes until such time as a yet more warlike race overcame their resistance and scattered them in turn far and wide.

None of these peoples was wholly dispersed, nor wholly absorbed by other tribes; and to this day national strains and characteristics, indicative of deep-rooted racial traits, persist among the men of the oases and the moving population of the trade-routes. Lusty, assertive, arrogant men they are, typical of the warrior tribes from whom they are descended. The true conquerors of the country, however, are the non-aggressive, peace-loving Chinese, instinctive colonizers, farmers and indefatigable traders.

Although forced to live in close proximity in the large Gobi oases, these people of varied racial elements do not love one another, and their way of life, their everyday habits, their dress, their manner of preparing food and of eating it remain totally different and in strong contrast one to another. There is very little





(Left) *Hung miao-dz (The Red Temple)* which stands a few miles from Urumchi, and is of such fame locally that it is spoken of a hundred times as a destination when Urumchi, or Tihwa as the Chinese call it—is mentioned only once. (Above) Looking down from the Red Temple on the city of Urumchi, surrounded by arid spaces over which desert storms sweep. (Opposite, top) Public garden, and (bottom) main street in Urumchi

*From Mrs Eardley Todd*

intermarriage between them; their forms of religion are antagonistic, and they each speak their own inherited mother tongue with only a superficial knowledge of their neighbours' languages.

The *bazaar* of a town situated in any fertile area is a revelation of racial adaptations and antagonisms. The centre of town life is the Chinese yamen where the District Magistrate administers justice, and the company of soldiers who form his bodyguard, police the town and preserve order, is quartered. Only second in authority is the principal mosque where the Moslem people discuss matters of primary importance to themselves. Severe ecclesiastical discipline is exercised by

the inner circle of *Hadjis* (those who have made the pilgrimage to Mecca) and *Ahungs* (title of respect: Ahung, too, often indicates a Moslem official) and disobedience to their orders is checked by such punishment as flogging and tying up the victim so as to cause extreme physical pain.

There are definite quarters of the town inhabited by Chinese only; others where all the houses are Turki; others again where Tungans live, not to speak of the serai-quarters where Mongolian, Kazakh (or Qazaq), Tibetan and Tartar travellers meet. The *bazaar* is the one place where all meet on common ground—not wholly in a spirit of competition, but with a sense that in the business world each one has



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a contribution to make to the general well-being of the community.

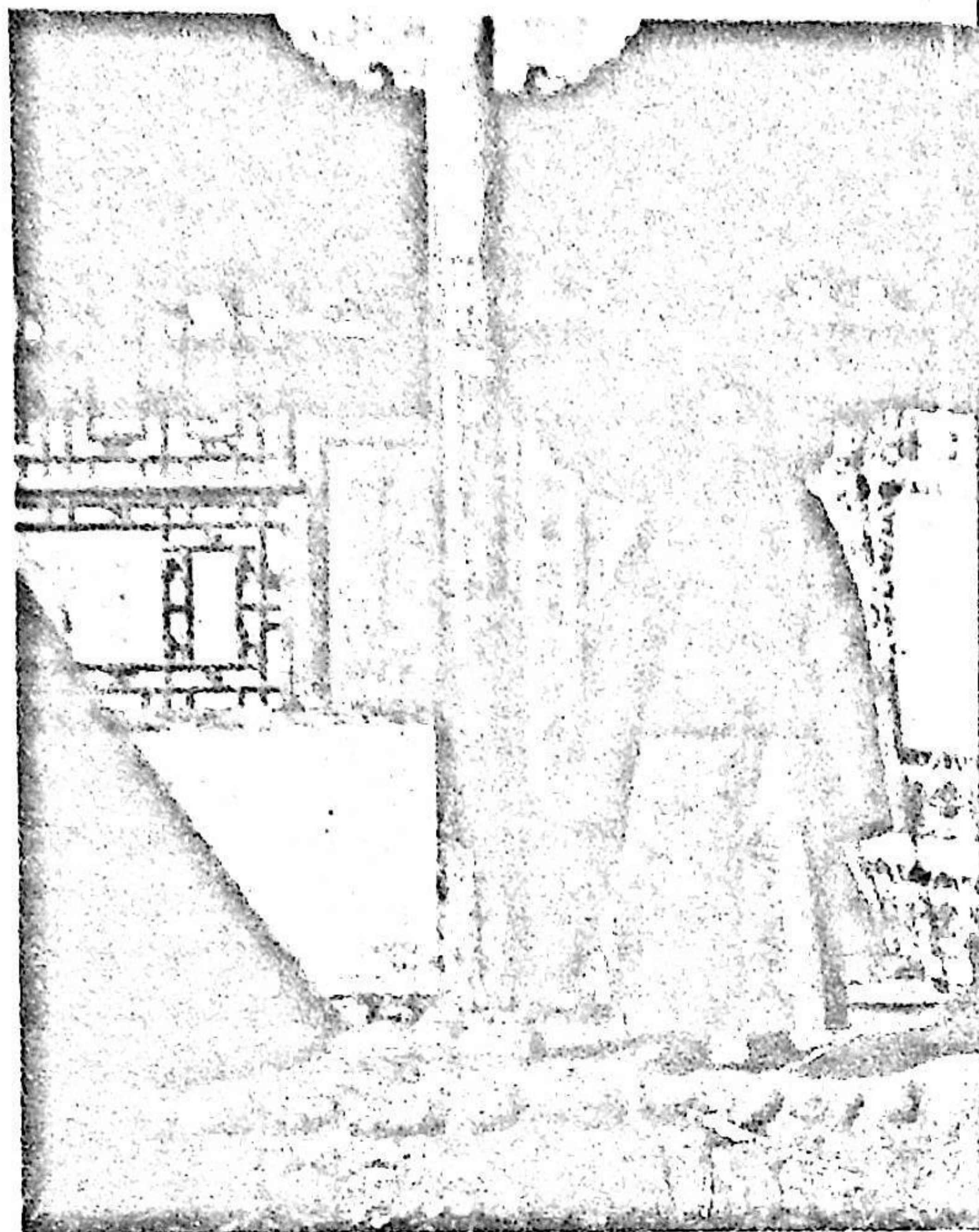
The largest town of Chinese Turkestan is the modern city which stands on the site of old Beshbaliq, the name of which constantly recurs in the historical annals of Dzungaria. Its official name of Tihwa (City of Enlightenment) is used by Chinese only, and even they have a more familiar name for use in ordinary talk. On the main travel roads, the Chinese bound for Tihwa will always speak of their destination as Hung niao-dz (The Red Temple). This is an insignificant spot a few miles from the centre of the town but it has succeeded in establishing its claim to give a name to the whole locality,

and Hung niao-dz is spoken of a hundred times where Tihwa is mentioned only once. The Turki, Mongol and Tartar people use no Chinese name but refer to the town as Urumchi only.

Urumchi, large and important as it is, has always been essentially an Asian centre, gathering to its market all the merchants of the caravan routes, yet remaining almost unknown to the Western world. Its importance has been largely determined by its location, for it is supplied with abundant water and good fuel—those two scarce commodities of oasis life. Urumchi lies on the main North Road connecting Hami (or Qumul) with Tah-cheng (or Chukuchak). It is situated



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*Urumchi has always been essentially an Asian centre, gathering to its market all the merchants of the caravan routes. This visitor (left) comes from a neighbouring oasis. (Above) A shy Mongolian Lama*

on the bank of a wide, tumultuous and un-navigable river, and over it towers the lofty summit of the Bogdo Ola (Mount of God), which is the highest point of the Tianshan range. The lower slopes of the Bogdo hold lovely lakes, cascades, green pastures jewelled with many wild flowers, and banks on which the mountain strawberry grows in abundance; but the town itself is far enough from the mountain to be surrounded by arid spaces over which the desert storms sweep, carrying clouds of dust and grit into its streets.

In summer Urumchi is hot and smelly, in the winter its roofs, streets and numberless alleys are covered by a heavy pall of snow, but in the transition seasons of spring and autumn the streets become expanses of the vilest mud. For one brief hour after sunrise and again in the evening twilight, frost hardens the surface and walking becomes possible; but all through the day only the most agile can get about, and that by balancing themselves on the narrowest strips of



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*A group of young girls on parade in Urumchi to commemorate one of the fallen leaders of rebellion*

harder ground and leaping from one boulder to another across spaces of liquid mud.

One of the interesting things to watch in Urumchi has been the rise of level in the town. It has been impossible for the inhabitants to dispose of their domestic rubbish in any other way than by dumping it on some waste land. Heavy falls of snow have hidden the mounds of refuse, and all through the long cold winter it has seemed a simple matter to throw cinders just outside the courtyard door. The result has been to raise the whole street level, and most people have to go down several steps to reach their front door.

The houses are lightly built and have flat mud roofs, so that when the snowstorms come, all available men are commandeered to clear them of snow. When this is neglected, the snow percolates through every crevice and quickly melts, running down the inside walls in little rivulets.

Within the walls of the city the business houses are mainly Chinese, but the town is flanked by two important suburbs. One of these is almost entirely owned by the Tungan population. These clever, enterprising people are Chinese-speaking Moslems whose forbears came from Western lands, bringing with them

Arabic speech and racial traits the remains which still strongly impress their descendants and make of them a colony which in all its speech remains alien to the Chinese. The women wear a distinctive dress, are seldom seen in the streets, and even then go partially veiled, and have never adopted the custom of foot-binding.

The progressive, lively and colourful side of Urumchi life is to be found in the moving crowds which throng the southern suburb known as the 'Foreigners' Quarter'. This is an open trade *bazaar* and it is here that Chinese, Turki, Kazakh, Siberian, Tartar, Mongolian, Uzbek, Tibetan and Manchurian merchants meet and exchange products. These varied people form a Central Asiatic crowd of unparalleled interest. Each man wears his distinctive dress, follows his own customs and handles his own particular line of business in a manner handed down to him by tribal custom. The Turki sits cross-legged on a low counter surrounded with mounds of dried fruits and flanked with piles of coarse woven saddle-bags. The Tartar, his face covered with an embroidered skull-cap, his cheeks ornamented with fancy-patterned clipped whiskers, his waist bound with a green

silk kerchief and his legs encased in magnificent riding-boots, spreads an attractive *devanture* of crimson and azure Siberian crockery and gleaming nickel-plated samovars and kettles. The Kazakh has sold his particular goods at dawn on the cattle market in the shape of sturdy steppe horses and he is a customer coveted by every merchant, for he wants the best goods on the market and cares little what he pays so that the wares are pleasing to him and will impress his nomad callers with their magnificence. The shy Mongolian and the distrustful Tibetan move self-consciously among the sharp townfolk, profoundly distrusting their clever ways and too rapid calculations, and slip away unobtrusively to the inner courtyards of certain important firms which are agents of renowned coastal furrier houses and draw their supplies from hardy nomad hunters to retail them among the fashionable folk of Peking and Shanghai. All these types congregate round the stalls, but the middle of the road is thronged by heavy freight carts from Central China, light vehicles from the town cart-ranks, long strings of camels, numberless men on horseback and bullocks ridden by the Kazakhs.

For more than a mile the pedestrian elbows his way through the crowd before reaching the gateway behind which lie the spacious grounds of the Soviet Consulate. This compound has witnessed radical changes, and before the time of the Russian Revolution, the Consul's bodyguard was formed of scarlet-coated Cossacks who rode furiously down the main road scattering the traffic right and left. The days of the galloping Cossacks are now passed and plainly clad men of the Red Army have replaced them. Inside the compound men and women now call each other *tavarish* ("comrade") and each must perform the task required by the public weal, to which central authority has appointed him. A few years ago the Russian administration established a department store in the South suburb where the wives of men in Consular employ were requisitioned and appointed to take their turn at serving customers or in giving assistance in the counting-house. The shop was stocked with goods produced in Siberian factories, the establishment of which formed part of Russia's five-year-plan of industrial development. The counters were spread with a great variety of printed cotton goods and gay kerchiefs with

*Every kind of dress is seen in the streets of Urumchi, from the traditional padded winter garb of the Tungan (left), to the summer trousers worn by the mule as a protection against flies*



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which Siberian women cover their fair hair and which frame so becomingly the pink-and-white face of the peasant girl. The *étalage* of crockery was as gay as were the prints, and its brass kettles and hand basins stamped with the trade mark of sickle and hammer were both strong and remarkably cheap. Snow-boots were another speciality, and the lady from the Consulate would serve customers either with a pair of the finest felt overshoes or with heavy felt boots which reached the knee and secured the wearer against frost-bitten toes.

The best houses in the Foreign Quarter were occupied by *émigrés*, Russians who were fiercely opposed to the political regime of their own country and who, at the time of Revolution, deliberately chose lifelong exile and travelled westward through hardship and danger to the frontier of Chinese Turkestan. While the greater number moved on, as far east as Tientsin and Shanghai, there were still enough left to establish large colonies at Chuguchak, Kulja, Urumchi and in several other oases. Among them were many cultured people of artistic ability and who spoke several European languages freely. They earned a precarious living by any means which came to hand, yet always kept the spirit of sociability alive in spite of difficult circumstances.

Of late years Urumchi has endured hard times. The strong and able Provincial Governor Yang Tseng-hsin was murdered in 1928 at a feast where he was a guest, and he was replaced by a man of weak and vacillating character. When conspiracies arose in this man's *entourage* he was unable to handle the situation and only succeeded in alienating his friends and increasing his enemies. Finally he only escaped arrest by fleeing in the most undignified manner. The Tungan rebellion was in full spate and there was no one able to seize the reins of government and control the situation. The position was one of extreme peril, and in order to stabilize the existing government it was necessary to ask help of the strong neighbour Russia. Response was immediate but, needless to say, certain privileges were required in return for assistance given.

The possibility of rapid intercourse by aeroplane between Moscow and Urumchi has now brought the two cities into closer contact

and will certainly facilitate commercial and cultural intercourse. For several years there has been exchange of goods, the Russian taking large supplies of raw cotton from Turkestan and supplying textiles and metal articles in return. Culturally the influence of Russia is now considerable and the Russian language is taught in the higher grade schools of Urumchi and other large towns. Facilities are also extended by Russia for the admission of Turkestan students to her Universities, Colleges of Animal Husbandry and Technical Institutes. All these things have helped to encourage intercourse between the peoples concerned.

The nearest British Consulate has been fifty-four stages from Urumchi in the town of Kashgar and it therefore follows that British influence has been slight in the town and area. A few British missionaries have lived and worked in Turkestan, but visits from British Consular Officials have been few. It is now reported that a British Consulate is to be opened in Urumchi and this should do much to further intercourse and promote understanding between the people of Turkestan and those of Britain.

*A Turki child whose interest in the photographer has lured him away from his family*



*From Mrs. Eastley Todd*