

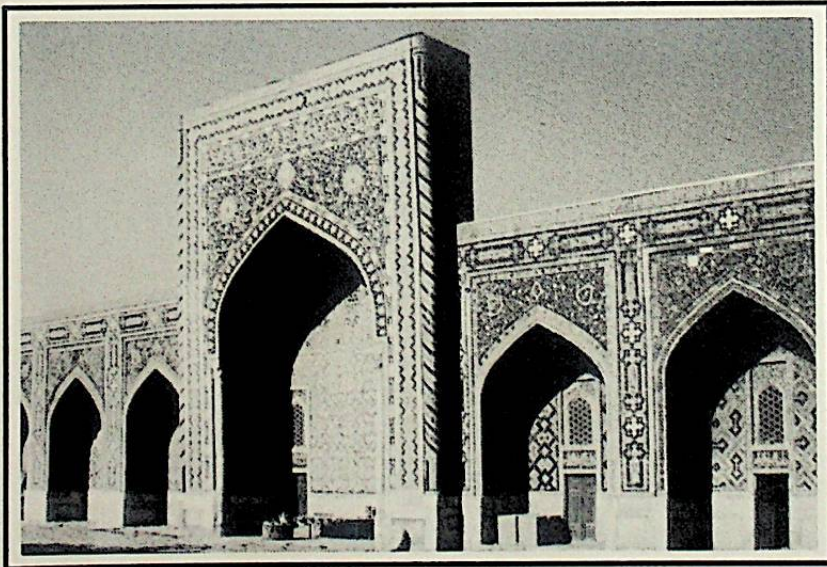
ISSN: 0898-6827

VOL. I, NO. 2

SPRING/SUMMER, 1997

JOURNAL OF CENTRAL ASIAN STUDIES

formerly
AACAR BULLETIN



The publication of the Association for the Advancement of Central Asian Research.

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Uighur Intellectuals 1920-1950: Pawns or Martyrs?

Dilber Thwaites

In the period from the 1920s to the 1950s, the area now known as Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region was the subject of a long struggle for control between the competing powers of the Soviet Union, the Chinese Nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). If we think of Xinjiang as a "pawn" in a larger game, we are assuming that Xinjiang was essentially a passive entity. In this article, I assert that Xinjiang (or East Turkistan), represented by its intellectual elite, was an active entity during this period with its people and leadership willing to make great sacrifices to assert national identity, and to ensure the survival of their culture.

In pursuing this goal, the local leadership recognised the reality of their situation, and sought solutions and supporters for their struggle. This article describes their situation, the political conditions in which the people had to live, the choices available to the leadership, and ultimately the betrayal from all sides that created martyrs who are still revered among the Uighur people and whose activities inspire continuing hope for self-determination.

The majority of peoples of Xinjiang are of Turkic origin (Uighur, Kazakh, Kirghiz, Uzbek and Tatar)¹ and have much in common with similar peoples across the border in what are now the new nations of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). All speak the same languages, with minor dialect variations. There is a common religion, and customs and lifestyles are similar. On the other hand, the people of Xinjiang are clearly distinct from the Chinese in racial, linguistic and cultural characteristics.²

I. Political Conditions during the Warlord era

In 1884 the Manchus declared Xinjiang a "province" of the Manchu Empire, while in reality it remained a series of separate domains retaining nominal traditional rulers, loosely governed from Beijing and paying taxes to the Chinese central government. A Chinese governor sent from the capital ruled through local kings. At this point, the population of the area remained, as it had been for centuries, principally Muslim Turks. The largest group, the Uighurs, lived in the region's oases practising agriculture and commerce. They had their own kings, administrative system of religious scholars (ulema), and a religious legal system and welfare system under the Chinese governor. Hakimbeg Hoja, the Khan of Ili, was recognised as a hereditary ruler by the final generation of the Manchu (Qing) government. The last such independent king is identified as Khan Maqsud, also known as Sultan Maqsud and to the Chinese as the Hami Wang (King of Hami).³

Life in these places had not changed substantially for many years, due to geographic isolation and lack of communication with the centers of civilization in Asia and Europe, especially as the land trade declined during and after the 17th Century. One reason for this stagnation was the combined forces of Chinese, Tsarist Russian and Soviet imperialism. Both major empires had clear ambitions in this region, seeking its natural resources and its strategic position. In order to protect these interests, they were keen to suppress any attempt to assert local nationality interests. This extended to considering the pursuit of contemporary knowledge and ideas as "political plotting" to overthrow Chinese or Russian (later Soviet) interests. The Russians had a particular aim of isolating the country from all outside influence, and of maintaining it in a state of mediaeval stagnation so as to remove any possibility of conscious and organized national resistance.⁴ Local intellectuals attempting to promote progress were destroyed by imperialist Chinese and Russian powers after claiming that these Xinjiang intellectuals were working for British, German, Japanese, Pan-Islamic or Pan-Turkic imperialist interests. This continued both under the Qing Dynasty, and following the Nationalist revolution in 1911. A US Representative in Urumqi in 1945, Robert Ward, said of the Sheng Shicai period:

The formula was simple: arrest every outstanding individual, every personality suspected of more than ordinary force or resources, herd them all into prison and subject them to the worst vicious tortures.⁵

Local discontent with Jin's rule came to a head with a rebellion. A band of the local people, led by the Uighur leader Hoja Niyaz, started an uprising which became known as the Hami rebellion. To cope with this rebellion, Governor Jin sent Liu Shaozu as military commander and Sheng Shicai as special advisor to the governor's chief of staff's office. On the other side, Hoja Niyaz called for help from Ma Zhongying, a commander of Donggan (Muslim Chinese) forces. These united local forces of Hoja Niyaz and Ma Zhongying were able in 1931-32 to defeat the forces of Liu and Sheng, although heavily outnumbered. In 1933 they established the Turkic Islamic East Turkistan Republic with Kashgar as its capital. The Soviet government was suspicious that Ma Zhongying had links with Japan.¹⁴ The foundation of this Republic was also of concern to the Soviet authorities, because it set a precedent for non-communist self-rule among the Turkic peoples of Central Asia.

The Soviet position on this kind of struggle was two-sided. On the one hand they claimed in principle to support struggles of national liberation, but on the other hand they were mindful of the dangers of such independent thinking in their own Soviet Central Asian republics. Burhan describes the USSR's policy of opposing "Pan-Turkism" in Central Asia including Xinjiang.¹⁵ With Soviet support, the Chinese were able to engineer a split between the two main Uighur leaders of the Hami rebellion, Hoja Niyaz and Yolvas, and achieve military victory. Left between Soviet forces on one side and the Chinese forces on the other, Hoja Niyaz had no choice but to accept a Chinese KMT truce offer that would supposedly leave him in power in the "Seven Districts" of southern Xinjiang, on condition that he sever his relations with the Dongan Ma Zhongying, who had more substantial military power.

Victories like this, combined with Soviet support, provided the opportunities for Sheng Shicai (the military advisor to Jin Shuren), to increase his power and to gain more followers at the expense of Jin Shuren, whose influence was waning. By 1933, Sheng Shicai was fully in control of the government side with the title of Governor.¹⁶ Social discontent and nationalist feeling were provoking serious and successful uprisings in many parts of Xinjiang including Kuqa, Aksu, Turfan and Kashgar.

An attack on Urumqi by rebels finally discredited the regime of Jin Shuren. The USSR saw this as an appropriate time to further promote Sheng Shicai's ambitions. Burhan recalls that General Ma and Hoja Niyaz did not trust Stalin, and Stalin did not want an independent Xinjiang which could create difficulties in Soviet Central Asia. On the other hand, by supporting Sheng Shicai, Stalin could maintain a relationship with the KMT Government, as well as using Sheng Shicai in Xinjiang to promote Communism and Soviet interests. Sheng was ambitious, he distrusted Ma Zhongying, and he also distrusted the KMT who sent an Inspector, Liu Wengan, to check up on what Sheng was doing. In 1933 Sheng sent a delegation to Moscow to make a secret pact by which Moscow would supply Sheng with arms, including planes, to fight the Islamic East Turkistan Republic nationalists.¹⁷

While not identifying himself directly with Communism, Sheng used the full set of Stalinist Communist approaches to consolidate his power. Sheng Shicai used the traditional "divide and rule" tactic of Chinese imperialism, and at the same time used political rhetoric to gain support among the local people. One of Sheng's slogans adapted from Marxism was "Separation to achieve Unity". This policy consisted of encouraging each of Xinjiang's nationalities to develop separately, supposedly to create one common culture of Marxism at the end of the process. Sheng divided the people into fourteen nominal "nationalities". By emphasizing the "equality" of all nationalities, Sheng in fact provided a means to provoke disunity among the Turkic groups by discouraging them from accepting any members of another group in a leading political role.

Anti-Imperialism was also an important slogan: anyone who disagreed with Sheng was likely to be labelled as a collaborator with Japanese or British imperialism.¹⁸ An "Anti-Imperialist League" was established in Urumqi in 1934, and the theme of imperialism exploiting small nationalities for their natural resources was attractive to many local intelligentsia. Burhan records his own role in these activities, and says that this activity was basically all directed to the consolidation of Sheng's personal power.¹⁹

It is not that Western imperialism had no effect on Xinjiang - it did. British policy in Xinjiang (exercised from British India) aimed at excluding Russian, and then Soviet, influence by encouraging the survival of a stable Chinese administration.⁶

However, western priorities did not extend beyond keeping a balance of powers in the region. In the international power game, these foreign powers were interested in Xinjiang as pawn in a wider game between superpowers to protect their own interests.

Global geopolitics continued to determine the fate of Xinjiang. During the Allied manoeuvring for spheres of influence during the 1940s, Xinjiang was affected by three key agreements. At the Tehran Conference in 1943 between the USA, Britain and the Soviet Union, the Soviet delegation asserted the right to re-establish, in the post-war period, the privileges it had enjoyed in the Far East from Czarist times. At Yalta in 1945, Soviet interests in the region were specifically recognised. When a copy of this was sent to the KMT (first by the Soviets and second by the USA) the KMT felt obliged to seek their own bilateral agreement with Stalin. The "Sino-Soviet Friendship Treaty" effectively disestablished the East Turkistan Republic government based in Ili, without any reference to that autonomous government. Associated with that was an agreement by Stalin to recognise Outer Mongolia as an "independent" state. In addition, Stalin agreed to prevent the smuggling of arms into East Turkistan, thus facilitating the assertion of Chinese control over Xinjiang.⁷

Xinjing was more useful as such a pawn so long as it remained backward. In this context, religion played a part in maintaining social and intellectual stagnation. Amongst the religious community, there were some progressive scholars, but in general they were oppressed both by the external imperial powers and also the conservative local forces. For example, the Russians sought to preserve the archaic forms of Islam and Islamic culture in Xinjiang, encouraging Koranic schools of the most conservative kind and protecting them from modernist influence.⁸ In the main, people were still ruled under feudal systems dating from the 17th Century. Local "medrese" (Islamic schools) were limited to the learning of the Arabic alphabet and memorising of Arabic prayers, leaving most people unaware of 19th and 20th Century developments.⁹

Religion became superstition, limiting intellectual freedom as well as life style issues, such as styles of dress. Religion was used as a tool to suppress new ideas and knowledge. Contemporary education was discouraged or suppressed, and those who promoted it were punished, because new ideas and knowledge were a threat to the existing powers.¹⁰

For 150 years Xinjiang had been ruled by Chinese governors sent by, and subject to, the Chinese central government. These governors in turn appointed all key officials such as Military Commanders, Magistrates, and customs officials. Initially this worked through the recognition of local "kings" who had a tributary relationship to the Chinese authorities.¹¹ This lasted under Governor Yang, but Jin Shuren, who took over from Yang by force in 1928, was determined to take more direct control of the region. He brought more Chinese troops to Xinjiang, and strengthened the Chinese police presence everywhere. He developed a reputation for despotism and personal degeneracy and cruelty, recorded by Chinese writer Zhang Dajun. Under his rule, the power of the local kings was reduced to a symbolic status.

Local rulers were placed in the position of fearing the Governor's increased military capacity, but also having to take responsibility for the increased levels of taxation, and thus the discontent of their own people. This made the local rulers insecure, and pushed them to more conservative and suspicious attitudes towards their own people's development. A Turkish visitor named Ahmet Kemal recorded cases of this. Kemal arrived in Kashgar in 1914, and proposed to set up contemporary schools for the local children. His suggestion was welcomed by many of the local people, but Omer Ahunbay, the local administrator appointed by the Chinese Governor, told Kemal that he would be punished if he allowed such a school to be established and he did not dare to support it.¹²

Going further, Governor Jin, in the name of "Land Reform," changed the system of land ownership from local chieftains to a new system which gave developed land to his own officers and forced local people to open new undeveloped land. Taxation was not levied equally upon Chinese and local people. The Chinese source Zhang considers that Jin's administration was worse than that of any local rulers.¹³

II. Assertion of KMT Power In Xinjiang

The traditional Chinese tactic of divide and rule was assisted by international trends during this period in polarisation between communists and anti-communists. This was expressed in divisions among Xinjiang's Uighur elite. The period of Sheng Shicai's rule in Xinjiang was significant in developing the divisions between the local power elite of Xinjiang and its intellectuals. The reign of terror and the failure of supposed "socialist" reforms produced cynicism towards Marxist ideology in sections of the elite and more broadly amongst the people.

Communism, though presented in Sheng's time as the "Six Star" movement, challenged many of the Islamic features of the existing power structure of the old Xinjiang society. At the same time, progressive "leftists" in Xinjiang were given a better appreciation of the cultural shackles which had inhibited Xinjiang's social progress and prevented Xinjiang responding to the social challenges of the twentieth century. For this reason, groups such as the Ili faction welcomed Communism in principle, as a possible basis for an anti-imperialist, positivist and rational outlook and political system. These divisions among the potential leadership of Xinjiang were reinforced by the influence of contest developing on the world stage between the USSR and the Western powers.

Soviet Communism was active in Xinjiang before the Chinese Communist Party. Burhan describes beginning to read Marxism in 1925, and beginning active underground work (under Soviet influence) in Xinjiang in 1933. By the late forties, the KMT anti-communist alliance with the USA had become significant.²⁶ The USA by that time had identified Xinjiang as a place of strategic interest against the USSR and supported the objective of keeping Xinjiang out of Soviet influence. Sheng Shicai had shifted his personal allegiance to the KMT in 1942, and had begun his own anti-communist campaigning.²⁷

In this atmosphere of divided allegiances, local leaders supported by the KMT anti-communist side included Mesud Sabri (a son of a big landlord from Ili);²⁸ Isa Yusuf Alptekin (an educated Uighur from Kashgar); Emin Bugra (a son of the Uighur Emir from Khotan); Yolvas Khan (from the ruling family of Hami, also known as Kumul); and Osman Batur, a Kazakh chieftain from the Altai region. Among the leftists, USSR and the CCP supported a different group of leaders. Sayfuddin Aziz was born in Kashgar, educated in USSR, later rose to become Chairman of the XUAR until taken to Beijing in 1976.²⁹ Burhan Shahidi worked with the Jin and Sheng governments, was imprisoned by Sheng 1938-44, then became a major figure of the CCP regime. Ahmetjan Kasim, born in Ili in 1914, rose to be a major nationalist leader of the East Turkistan Republic.³⁰ Abdul Kerim Abbas worked underground against the Han Chinese, and in 1945 was one of the leaders of the East Turkistan Republic. Rahimjan Sabir was a son-in-law of Mesud Sabri, and a member of the underground ERT organisation. He was supported by the Russians because his father-in-law, Mesud Sabri, was supported by the KMT.³¹ Locals who accepted the support of either side were, in general, motivated less by ideology than by perceptions of the most likely means to obtain the greatest degree of self-determination for their homeland compatible with practical considerations.

In the volume "Xinjiang Research" published by the Chinese Border Regions History and Language Institute of Taiwan in July 1964, the USSR had two kinds of objectives in relation to Xinjiang. First, it was concerned to retain its own access to Xinjiang's natural resources and to see Xinjiang split off from China as a defensive buffer zone for the USSR. Secondly, it saw Xinjiang's strategic position as useful in order to apply pressure to Communist China, and to provide a strategic bridge to Tibet, India, Pakistan and all of South Asia.³² In this way Xinjiang also had a place in the strategic competition between the Communist and anti-Communist worlds. In response to this strategic interest, Chiang Kaishek invited the USA and the UK to establish consulates in Xinjiang as a counter to Soviet influence.³³

Sheng Shicai's successor as provincial Governor was Wu Zhongxin (1944-46) - a personal confidant of Chiang Kaishek. He advocated a colonial style of rule, and concentrated on strengthening the Han Chinese hold on the administration and, according to Jack Chen, "milking the flagging economy dry."³⁴ Wu implemented the KMT policy of encouraging Han Chinese transmigration to minority regions.

Another key organisation set up by Sheng to support his rule was the "Xinjiang Security Bureau" modelled on Stalin's security organisation, the OGPU and set up in 1934.²⁰ An adviser sent by the USSR from Outer Mongolia helped set it up and was appointed secretary of the organisation. Appointments to leading posts in this organisation resulted in replacement of officials such as Kadir, a police superintendent from Kashgar who had been one of Hoja Niyaz's men, with other Chinese more loyal to Sheng. Eventually every town of every size in Xinjiang had a branch of this security apparatus in place, and the whole population was within reach of Sheng's secret police.²¹

The "National Assemblies" were used to put pressure on local representatives and leaders. The first two meetings of the Assembly consisted of leaders of all nationalities and institutions in Xinjiang. But from the Third Assembly, more and more representatives were added from constituencies such as soldier, students and women: naturally these were hand-picked to support Sheng's positions.²² In general, the taxation system was changed from the previous feudal "tax-farming" system to taxation based on consumption. Many different taxes applied: export, import, gifts, general consumption tax, animal tax, forestry tax, residential rates, grain tax, charcoal tax, printing tax, stamp tax, cigarette and alcohol taxes, water rates, car tax, forest access fee and others.²³

Sheng's power developed with Soviet support. The USSR aimed to gain access to Xinjiang's natural resources and to establish a friendly, Communist-style Xinjiang next to their own Central Asian republics. Sheng used the methods Stalin had used in USSR to separate wealth from power. He trained chosen people as cadres to support his policy, and to undermine the old political system or any opposition. He applied the technique of "divide and conquer" to suppress growing nationalism and to get rid of rival nationalist leaderships. He mobilised the local peoples' demands for social change by exploiting the rhetoric of "democracy", "education", "economic equality" and "law and justice", but then used them in identifying supporters and getting rid of opposition.

Whereas the Chinese lived in a realm of sophisticated political strategy, the Turkic approach to politics reflected more the older cultures in which loyalties were primarily to a small group under a single leader who took responsibility for his group's welfare. For the Turks, "honour" was also a central and important value, placing a high value on a given word and extending to heavy concern about such things as "face". They were confronted with both Chinese and USSR politics that were much more clearly focussed on achieving long-term objectives, regardless of the means adopted. Even for those who understood the foreigners' strategies, it is difficult to see what practical options for resistance were available.

The period of Sheng Shicai's rule was a bloody one, but it did result in a rise in people's consciousness on matters such as the importance of modern education; social change (such as the place of women in society); self-determination; economic management and political participation. There was an increase in the number of people with contemporary intellectual training. On the other hand, it is hard to describe the economic, social and psychological damage Sheng inflicted on Xinjiang. The methods of "proletarian dictatorship" were used to enforce his iron-fisted dictatorship. During the ten-year period, he killed by some estimates 80-100,000 local people,²⁴ and according to Jack Chen 200,000 people were killed, arrested, or disappeared during his rule.²⁵ The deep misery and wounds Xinjiang people faced did not stop their inspiration for nationalism and self-determination. On the contrary, some people continued to believe that rebelling and dying was preferable to living under the Chinese. This common feeling was expressed in many rebellions - for example the establishment of the first Islamic East Turkistan Republic in 1934, and later the second East Turkistan Republic in 1944.

In some ways, Sheng's period prepared the ground for the Chinese Communist Party's later takeover. But at the same time it also initiated anti-communist feeling. The local people were by nature Islamic and conservative in their traditions. Sheng's changes did not even bring the economic progress that he had promised, so that the huge price paid by Xinjiang people for Sheng's reforms was seen as nothing but disaster, and left a legacy of political bitterness and cynicism. This period divided the local leadership into pro-communist and anti-communist camps, each seeking external support from either the Soviet Union or the KMT.

ity problem - which was to grant them "self-determination" after the CCP had taken over China.⁴¹

The next stage of the negotiations resulted in some important further concessions by the KMT. It was agreed that the whole of Xinjiang would be given autonomous status, not just the three districts. Further, General Zhang indicated that the KMT would allow local forces to be maintained in the areas already held by the rebels, under the name of a "Peace Preservation Corps", but under the final military and diplomatic command of the KMT.⁴² By this stage, cold war priorities were beginning to shape the foreign powers' involvement in the Xinjiang situation. The USSR sought to use the ETR, and the KMT was increasingly anti-Communist and dependent on the support of the USA: thus neither of the major sponsors were happy with the peace agreement of January 1946.⁴³ The KMT did not regain full control over the Three Districts, and the ETR found itself under USSR pressure to agree to lesser positions than they had originally fought for.

During this period there was also a significant change in the leadership of Ili faction. Alihantore, the President of the ETR, strongly opposed the compromise reached with the KMT provincial authorities, and is reported to have wept at the conclusion of the January peace agreement. Subsequently, he was kidnapped by Soviet agents and taken to the USSR, in order to neutralise his religious nationalism and clear the way for Ahmetjan, a socialist. The story was circulated that Alihantore had "gone on holiday", but both Ikilil⁴⁴ and Assur Vahit provide detailed accounts of Alihantore's abduction in a car by Soviet soldiers after being invited to "an important meeting with Soviet officials" at Korgas, close to the Soviet border. Alihantore ended his days under house arrest in Tashkent, doing Persian and Arabic translations for the Soviet government.⁴⁵

From Chinese and Soviet perspectives, the ETR ceased to exist as a wholly separate government from the time of the Sino-Soviet Friendship Agreement, and later its representatives joined the provincial government in Urumqi. This radical change provoked division between the factions who had made up the ETR. There was now pressure on the Ili authorities to eliminate all "bourgeois nationalists" such as Alihan Tore, whilst Osman Batur joined the Urumqi government under the KMT. As it developed, all Ili representatives to the Provincial government turned out to be closely associated with the pro-Communist faction.⁴⁶ These included Abdul Kerim Abbas (Vice Secretary-General), Burhan Shahidi (Second Vice-Chairman), Saifuddin Azziz (Commissioner of Education). The communist allegiance of these individuals was confirmed in interview by both Yusuf Geg Muhlisi and Assur Vahit, members of the same Ili government.⁴⁷ The anti-communist KMT local nominees were Muhammed Emin Bugra (Commissioner for Reconstruction), Isa Yusuf Alptekin (Minister without portfolio), Janim Khan (Commissioner for Finance), Salis (Vice Secretary-General) and Mesud Sabri (Supervising Commissioner for Xinjiang).⁴⁸

It is worth observing that Burhan Shahidi, who was an economics graduate from Berlin University, was not selected by either communists or KMT for the Finance position, whereas the local man chosen, Janim Khan, was a Kazakh known to be illiterate in Chinese. He would thus clearly be dependent on the officials placed by the Chinese to "advise" him, concentrating power in Han hands. In another example, Osman Batur, an important Kazakh chieftain, reacting to the Soviet influence on the Ili faction, broke his ties with Ili and began to organise a nationalistic resistance, while re-entering negotiations with the KMT.⁴⁹ Events such as this are indications of how the policy of "divide and rule" was effective against the Xinjiang nationalists.

Assur Vahit recalls that both USSR and KMT worked to manipulate local leaders. Left-leaning leaders such as Ahmetjan Kasim believed that because the USSR was powerful, ETR could not afford to oppose them and was better off working to gain USSR support for ETR independence. Right-leaning leaders such as Isa Yusuf Alptekin and Emin Bugra were opposed to Soviet influence on both ideological and pragmatic grounds, believed that the USSR could not be trusted as an ally, and therefore sought KMT support for self-determination. It seems both sides were aware of their vulnerability to manipulation. Vahit recalls that at the time when the coalition disintegrated and Bugra and Alptekin were sent to Nanjing, Ahmetjan Kasim farewelled them at the airport with the words:

As the Cold War developed following the Yalta Agreement, the KMT began to implement an anti-Soviet, anti-Communist policy, including closure of the border trade that was important to the economy of Xinjiang. The large scale Han immigration increased the discontent of the local people with the KMT government, coming on top of the problems caused by the closure of border trade. The rampant inflation and the official corruption were all added to the burdens felt by the local Turkic peoples. Mesud Sabri, living in Chungking, wrote in 1945 that the KMT rule in Xinjiang was characterised by the domination of large numbers of troops who were regarded as "human-faced locusts". He noted that this was the same form of colonialism which had contributed to the previous substantial uprising in the region - that at Kumul (Hami) in 1932.³⁵

Muhammed Amin Bugra, an exiled Emir of Hotan also living in Chungking at that time, commented:

With the departure of Sheng Shicai.... a person like Wu Chungshin (Wu Zhongxin), who cherished the policy of obliterating the nationalities dependent upon China, was appointed. Attempts were made to separate the Turkish tribes, who had lived as brothers from of old. By promoting old-fashioned evil men, and crushing the enlightened youth, our educational and cultural activities were stifled. Economic activities were destroyed and this policy of Wu Zhunghsin resulted in the Ili revolt and intervention by the USSR. The Chinese government did not listen to those of us who warned them that this policy was a mistake.³⁶

III. The Ili Uprising

The combination of circumstances, corruption and hardship outlined above led many of the local people to conclude that an uprising of some kind was a necessity. In November 1944 a group comprising members of a nationalist persuasion as well as socialists, formed a Peoples Committee of the East Turkistan Republic, to claim independence from China.³⁷ Chinese-published accounts of this portray it as being a rebellion against the corruption of the KMT. However, evidence from the local participants makes clear that it was seeking independence from Han Chinese rule. As their president, they appointed Alihantore two vice presidents (all nationalists), plus a seventeen-member committee including the socialists Ahmetjan, Saifuddin, Abdukerim Abbas, Burhan Shahidi and Ishakjan.

The KMT were alarmed at the growing popularity of the rebellion. Chiang Kaishek sent a message to Stalin indicating that he would bring the United States into the issue if Stalin did not cease giving support to the East Turkistan Republic. The Russians backed down, and put pressure on the Ili group to halt their advance at the Manas River, not far from the capital, Urumchi. From there, the Russians were to "mediate" a truce between the ETR and the KMT.³⁸

Zhang Zhizhong was sent as the KMT negotiator with the ETR, while at the same time the Chinese were bringing in additional Han troops to Xinjiang. Sheng Shicai was removed. The KMT's Sino-Soviet Treaty was signed in 1945, at a time when the Soviet Union was still waiting to see whether KMT or CCP would triumph in China's civil war. Both Chinese and Soviet parties were in fact just playing for time on this issue, while the ETR representatives continued to negotiate in good faith.³⁹ The ETR also continued to implement its political programs and attempted to extend its influence into southern Xinjiang. An ETR Congress elected in 1945 resolved to liberate the whole of Xinjiang in order to complete the full independence of the East Turkistan Republic.⁴⁰

In October 1945, representatives of the ETR government arrived in Urumqi to negotiate with the KMT, with Soviet mediation. But the KMT delegate, General Zhang Zhizhong, relied on the terms of the (secret) Sino-Soviet Friendship Treaty and refused to accept that the ETR delegates represented a separate, sovereign government. The KMT offered a 12-point negotiating document based on the assumption of Xinjiang as a province of China, but with certain minor concessions to autonomy. Also in 1945 Mao Zedong, at the Seventh Party Congress of the CCP, in a report on the CCP-KMT coalition government of the time, denounced the "oppressive policies" of the KMT as "great power chauvinism" and said that the CCP fully endorsed Sun Yatsen's position on the minor-

in the political affairs of Xinjiang. He left for Europe via the USSR in 1929, commenced studying economics at the University of Berlin in 1930, and graduated in 1932.⁶⁰ Despite the provisions of the current Chinese Constitution which provided for the election of Provincial Governors (Article 113(2)), Burhan was simply appointed by the central government, by agreement between the USSR and the KMT.

At the same time as Burhan's appointment, Mesud and Isa Yusuf Alptekin were recalled to Nanjing. There could be two motives for these recalls - one to prevent a concentration of the principle nationalist leaders in Urumqi at one time (where they could possibly form a powerful alliance), and another to satisfy the Ili faction and their Soviet backers that the more right-wing leaders were being taken from the scene as the leftist Burhan re-emerged. The ETR government was thus squeezed between the Soviet and KMT-US interests. The manoeuvres both weakened the unity and strength of the ETR leadership, and also undermined the East Turkistan people's confidence in their aspiration for independence and betterment of their own peoples' welfare. This was aptly summed up in Ahmetjan Kasim's remark in farewelling his colleagues that "they did not let us unite."

IV. The Burhan Administration January 10 - September 25 1949.

Burhan presided over a period in which the power of the KMT in Xinjiang was rapidly weakening. Burhan, supported by the CCP, used his powers to undermine further the fading KMT rule in Xinjiang. Burhan's period also saw the proliferation of underground leftist Turkic organisations. Another major step was the reintroduction of leftist and communist personnel to the government structures of the Provincial Government.

These steps took place against the background of a secret agreement between Stalin and Mao which had already sealed the future of Xinjiang. Yusuf Beg Muhlisi says that an agreement was made in a meeting between Stalin and Mao on 14 February 1949 in the absence of any representatives of Xinjiang's peoples or even of its nominal government. In Muhlisi's words, this amounted to a betrayal of the sacrifice, hardship and revolutionary efforts of Xinjiang's people. Muhlisi is currently seeking access to the Soviet documents held in Moscow which record the relevant agreement.⁶¹

According to Zhang Dajun, who was in KMT military intelligence at the time, the USSR was in negotiation with the CCP before the PLA was in a position to enter Xinjiang. Peng Dehuai in Lanzhou, assisted by Wang Jiexiang conducted negotiations with the Soviet Consul General to produce an Interim Agreement on the Liberation of Xinjiang. Clauses to this agreement included that the USSR would be allowed to freely establish military bases in Xinjiang, and the right to use those bases in connection with the Soviet strategy for the Middle East. Regarding the settlement of the status of Xinjiang itself, a further formal agreement would need to be concluded. On these conditions, the Soviet Union would permit the CCP to enter Xinjiang. The Interim Agreement also provided for the creation of a "Joint Venture Company" for the exploitation of Xinjiang's resources.⁶²

The above is a clear example of the CCP making use of the Ili faction's dependence upon Moscow by negotiating over the head of the Ili authorities. In interviews, both Assur Vahit and Yusuf Beg Muhlisi said that the CCP had employed deception in making promises to the Ili faction to prevent any further uprisings, whilst secretly making contrary agreements with Moscow.⁶³

According to one source this was not the last attempt of the USSR to retain a more significant influence in Xinjiang. In a book co-authored by General Sheng Shicai in 1958, the claim is made that in the summer of 1949, the Soviet union made a final attempt to have Xinjiang set up as a puppet buffer state along the lines of the Mongolian Peoples' Republic (MPR). The approach is said to have been made to General Tao Shiyue, KMT garrison commander in Urumqi. He was told that if he declared Xinjiang independent, the USSR would "order" the CCP not to invade Xinjiang, and the independent state would be incorporated into a federal republic following the Communist victory in the rest of China. The General is said to have referred this suggestion to KMT headquarters, where it was given some serious consideration on the grounds that it would be likely to cause friction

“Goodbye, with my respects. We should have stayed united, but they did not allow us to be united... Goodbye.”⁵⁰

Mesud Sabri was appointed by the KMT to be Chairman of the Xinjiang Province. In this position, he had no chance from the beginning to gain broad support. As an anti-Communist, he was naturally unacceptable to the USSR and their sponsored group in Ili. Eventually he would be denounced by Soviet sources as “a double-dyed nationalist and Pan-Turkist, an agent of imperialist intelligence who had served Germany, Japan, Britain and the United States.”⁵¹

The Ili faction immediately denounced Mesud as a KMT collaborator. Although some consider Mesud Sabri was well-intentioned, his regime was undermined by conflicting Soviet and KMT pressures, and by a steady takeover of all responsible functions by Han officials.⁵² According to the agreement between the ETR and the KMT, the Xinjiang Coalition Government was to consist of a Council of 25 members, of whom ten were to be appointed by the Chinese Central government, and fifteen were to be elected to represent their own districts.⁵³

But over this period, the KMT continued to implement organisational changes which made clear that they intended to preserve Han dominance. The principle mechanism was that, while placing local people in some highly visible positions in the government, the government organisation was being changed and supplemented by the creation of new organs which were dominated by the Han Chinese. An example was creation of the post of Comptroller of Finance, occupied by a Han official Guo Xixi, to exercise the real power over Provincial government finances, where the nominal Finance Minister was Janimhan, the Kazakh representative who could not read Chinese.

Another development during the period of Mesud's “leadership” was that additional Han officials began to attend the meetings of the provincial executive Government.⁵⁴ Elections for the posts of District Inspector-General in the the seven districts controlled by the KMT, produced results which in every case ensured a KMT member or sympathiser held the post (including the several Turkic nominees such as Hatije and Yolvas Khan).⁵⁵ Even where a Turkic nominee was elected, it was reported by the British Consul that these elected officials were not given any real opportunity to exercise their powers, and the Chinese thus failed to make use of an opportunity to gain some local sympathies.⁵⁶

As a result of this process, even some Turkics who were sympathetic to the KMT found they could no longer support Mesud's government. Isa Yusuf Alptekin, holding the position of Secretary-General of the Provincial Government, became an outspoken critic of the Mesud regime on the grounds that it was dominated by the KMT Han Chinese behind the scenes.⁵⁷ At this point, external events were tipping the scales further against the success of any Turkic nationalism in the region. On the one hand, the progress of the Chinese Civil War was indicating that a Communist victory was a real possibility, and thus that the USSR did not need to provide for future accommodations with a KMT-controlled China. On the other hand, the KMT, related to its fight against domestic Communist, including the Ili faction, had armed and supported an anti-Communist Kazakh leader Osman Batur in military activities along the border between Xinjiang and the Mongolian Peoples' Republic (a Soviet satellite). This added to Moscow's general unease about encouraging any form of local nationalism so close to its own Central Asia republics.⁵⁸ Both matters induced a Soviet attitude to the Ili faction which was less tolerant of the Islamic and nationalistic elements of their programs, and sought instead a more standard Moscow line.

All this gave the Soviet Union an even clearer interest in destabilising the Urumqi Coalition Government, as a contribution to the overall collapse of KMT rule in China. By the third quarter of 1948, KMT power in China was evidently crumbling. In what appears to have been an attempt to compromise with Soviet pressure, there was negotiation between the Soviet Union and the KMT in Nanjing which resulted in agreement to replace Mesud Sabri as head of provincial government with Burhan Shahidi, who as a communist would be more acceptable to the Soviet Union. Mesud was recalled to Nanjing on December 31st 1948. On January 10 1949 the KMT announced in Nanjing that Burhan Shahidi had been appointed provincial governor.⁵⁹ Burhan had had a varied experience

cratic election" which had been previously agreed.

In an interview with some survivors of the ETR, who have lived forty years in exile in Soviet Kazakhstan, it was reported that the story of the plane crash was not believed. A seventy year old Ashir Vakhidov⁶⁹ was quoted as saying that the lost leaders had in fact been betrayed by both Stalin and the Chinese communists.⁷⁰ Burhan records in his memoirs that on September 19th, he sent a telegram to Mao Zedong assuring him of "the determination of the people of Xinjiang to sever all connection with the reactionary Kuomintang."⁷¹ Four days later Mao Zedong replied asking Burhan to "assist" the Chinese Peoples' Liberation Army when it entered the region. As a final formality, Burhan jointly with the local Chinese KMT garrison commander Tao Zhiyue, telegraphed Mao on declaring the allegiance of the Xinjiang provincial government to the new CCP Government in Beijing.⁷²

V. Conclusion

One of the important factors in preparing the ground for the CCP takeover was that the earlier regime of Sheng Shicai, going back sixteen years, had seeded socialist and Marxist ideas amongst the intellectual leadership in the region. The Sheng Shicai period had also contributed to development of divisions between leftist and rightist leadership groups among the region's local nationalists. There was thus a ready-made leftist group in place with whom the CCP could deal directly, and a rightist group whom they could identify as "class enemies" from the start. The CCP presented itself as anti-imperialist, sympathetic to the desires of nationalities for self-determination, and ready to accept the eleven points of the Ili faction's treaty demands which had been stalled by the KMT.⁷³ With this promise they were thus able to attract some mass support. The Stalinist tactics of the CCP encouraged the pragmatic approach of offering "peaceful co-existence" to create a "united front" with non-CCP leaders and factions, with the intention of later restricting or neutralising any real power for anyone other than the CCP itself.

Finally, the local nationalist leadership in Xinjiang were isolated, both internally and internationally, by the manoeuvrings of the USSR, the KMT and the CCP. They in the end had no choice but to negotiate the best outcome possible to retain what autonomy they could in the context of a clear CCP assumption of power in all of China.⁷⁴

During the period of CCP takeover, many of the people of Xinjiang extended their enthusiasms and trust to the CCP, believing it provided hope for the betterment of their society. Since that time, the practice of traditional Chinese colonialism in Xinjiang has almost completely eliminated any such trust. So long as traditional Chinese colonialism manifests itself in Xinjiang in the system where all real power is reserved for the Communist Party, and all power in the Party is reserved for Han Chinese, and all opportunities for advancement are determined by the Party - then it will be impossible for the Turkic peoples of Xinjiang to identify their interests with the Chinese nation.

While the authorities and Han settlers in Xinjiang make it impossible for the Uighurs and others to share the dreams of personal and communal liberty, and the opportunity to share wealth and power, then ruling those people will remain difficult. Colonialism is extinct in most parts of the world, and globalization is ensuring that people in the 1990s and next century cannot be kept ignorant of their own situation and the situation of other peoples. Uighurs are increasingly demonstrating that they have no intention of accepting forced assimilation into a foreign nation and culture.

China therefore faces a choice in its policy toward Xinjiang. China could demonstrate the behaviour of an ancient and civilized culture, with experience and understanding of the suffering of colonized peoples, and work towards due recognition of the rights and aspirations of the Turkic nationalities within its borders. Alternately, China must expect to face a continuous cycle of uprisings and brutal suppression that will be costly, that will weaken China's own system, and that will discredit China's international reputation to the detriment of both Han and Turkic peoples' interests.

between the CCP and the Soviet Union. On the other hand, this proposal would have been contrary to all traditional Han Chinese imperial attitudes, which hold that any ruler who adds to China's territory is a success, while any ruler who concedes territory is a failure. Tao, on this occasion, was ordered to fight a rear-guard action against the PLA. Faced with this, Tao eventually surrendered to the advancing PLA.⁶⁴

This report is credible on two grounds. It was common Soviet political tactics to encourage several possible key players in difficult and fluid situations such as prevailed in Xinjiang. It was also clear that the USSR was not keen on the establishment of strongly nationalistic regimes such as the East Turkistan Republic which could be a destabilizing influence on the politics of their own Turkic republics. This was illustrated in the Soviet's action in reclaiming and repatriating to the USSR all arms and ammunition which had been made available to the Ili faction.⁶⁵ A puppet regime headed by a renegade Han general, as proposed to Tao, would in that context be more dependent upon the USSR and thus more useful as a diplomatic tool.

During 1949, General Zhang Zhizhong, who had returned to Nanjing to participate in negotiations with the CCP, switched his allegiance from the KMT to the CCP (as many others were also doing at that time). In August 1949, Zhang sent a telegram from Beijing to Burhan, suggesting that Burhan restore the alliance with the Ili faction. The proposal was to make a truce and if possible get the Ili faction's support for the Communist "liberation" of all of Xinjiang, particularly the southern regions which were still controlled by various nationalist groups. Burhan invited the leaders of the Ili group to a conference in Urumqi and the truce was made that the Manas river would be respected as the line of truce, and no hostilities would take place between the Ili and Urumqi forces. A truce of this kind was important to the CCP, in order to prevent the Ili forces becoming allied with other nationalists in southern Xinjiang.

The USSR had already ensured that the Ili faction had been purged of its "bourgeois nationalist" members. However, the Ili group's leadership still contained people such as Ahmetjan Kasim and Abdulkерim Abbas who, while "leftist" in many ways, remained strongly "nationalist" in other ways. It is obvious that such people were likely to be an obstacle to any smooth Chinese Communist takeover in Xinjiang. During this period, both Soviet and Chinese interests pressured the ETR government to weed out nationalist elements from its leadership.

Muhlisi says that the fate of Xinjiang had already been decided during 1948-50 between the CCP leaders and USSR. The promise of autonomy, pursued sincerely by the Ili faction, was a false promise designed only to gain time for the CCP to bring its army into Xinjiang. With this agreement between Mao and Stalin in place, the CCP needed a direct link with the Three Districts leadership. The CCP sent Deng Liqun to Xinjiang for this purpose.⁶⁶ Leaders such as Ahmetjan Kasim were unaware of this, and continued to put forward demands and suggestions on forms of self-determination - which by that time were increasingly perceived as a threat to the plans of the CCP and its Soviet supporters. Later in August 1949, a plane took off from Yining to take the majority of the Ili faction leaders to Beijing, where they were to join the National Peoples Political Consultative Congress being convened by Mao Zedong's CCP. Deng Liqun brought the Three Districts leaders messages from the CCP and personal invitations from Mao Zedong to attend the first Peoples Consultative Congress Meeting in Beijing.⁶⁷ The plane headed first for Alma Ata, in the USSR. Burhan was subsequently informed by the USSR that the plane had crashed, and all aboard had been killed.

With this crash, the last elements of the progressive nationalist leadership were removed, and the way was clear for the CCP and Soviets to sort out between them their interests in the region. But the event also created martyrs of a group who had struggled so hard to preserve their national identity from absorption into China. Burhan was advised to keep information on the crash secret, in case it caused a popular uprising. Those killed were Ahmetjan Kasim, Abdulkерim Abbas (a Uighur), Delilhan (a Kazakh), Izhak Khan (a Kirghiz) and Lo Zu (a Han).⁶⁸ The Soviet consul also advised Burhan that Seyfuddin Aziz had been despatched from Ili to represent the three districts at the meeting in Beijing. It is worth noting that Seyfuddin's assignment was not even made by the nominal head of the Provincial Government (Burhan), let alone going through the processes of "demo-

- ²⁶Whiting AS and Sheng Shi-Tsai, *Sinkiang: Pawn or Pivot*, (Michigan State University Press, 1958), 82
- ²⁷ Ibid., 83
- ²⁸Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences Minorities Research Institute (eds), *Concise History of Xinjiang*, Xinjiang Peoples Publishing House, May 1979, vol 2 , 397.
- ²⁹Kurban op cit p.86
- ³⁰ Ibid., 67
- ³¹Ibid., 78
- ³²China Border Regions History and Language Research Society, *Xinjiang Research*, Taipei, 1964), 432
- ³³Wenshi Ziliao op cit p.25
- ³⁴Chen op cit p.201
- ³⁵Forbes op cit p.170
- ³⁶ Ibid.
- ³⁷ *Xinjiang Research* op cit p.325
- ³⁸ Forbes op cit p.190
- ³⁹Former ETR Government participant, later CCP member, Yusuf Beg Muhlisi, now heading an organisation in Alma Ata called the "East Turkestan Liberation Front" interviewed September 1992.
- ⁴⁰Xinjiang Research op cit p. 325
- ⁴¹Lydia Holubinchy , *The East Turkic Review* no.4, Munich 1960, 94, cited in "East Turkistan Information" WWW page.
- ⁴²Forbes op cit p.192
- ⁴³Benson op cit p.67
- ⁴⁴Kurban p. 79
- ⁴⁵Former member of ETR government, later head of the Three Regions CCP committee, now head of "Uighurstan Liberation Front" based in Alma Ata, interviewed 1992.
- ⁴⁶ Forbes op cit p.196
- ⁴⁷Muhlisi interview, Vahit interview.
- ⁴⁸Forbes op cit p 196
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., 203

Notes

¹In this article, the term "Uighur" is sometimes used in contexts that include the other Turkic peoples living in Xinjiang. The reason for this is that the Uighurs comprise the vast majority of such peoples in Xinjiang, whereas most of the other Turkic groups have independent "Homelands" in the CIS.

²Zhang Dajun, *Sishi nian Dongluan Xinjiang* Hong Kong: Yazhou Chubanshi, 1956), 47.

³Chen, Jack, *The Sinkiang Story*, (New York: MacMillan 1977), 241.

⁴ Benson op cit p.38

⁵Forbes, ADW, *Warlords and Muslims in Chinese Central Asia*, London: Cambridge, 1986), 16.

⁶Forbes op. cit., 63

⁷Wang Dagang "The Xinjiang Question of the 1940s", *Asian Studies Review*, Vol. 21, No1, 1996, 83.

⁸Kemal, Ahmet ed. *Oklem, Necdet 70 Yil Evvel ki Cin Turkestani, Bilgehan Basimevi*, (Izmir: Bornova 1984), 29.

⁹ Ibid., 30

¹⁰Zhang op cit p.28

¹¹Ibid., 27

¹²Kemal op cit p.31

¹³Zhang op cit

¹⁴Burhan op cit p.191

¹⁵ Ibid., 33

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 24

¹⁸ Ibid., 71

¹⁹ Ibid., 234

²⁰Zhang, 289

²¹Burhan, 267

²² Ibid., 80

²³Zhang op cit p.83

²⁴Benson op cit p.27

²⁵Chen op cit p.198

⁵⁰Vahit interview

⁵¹Forbes op cit p.210

⁵²Vahit interview op cit.

⁵³Sun Fukun op cit p 10

⁵⁴Benson op cit p. 160

⁵⁵ Ibid., 161

⁵⁶ Ibid., 163

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Forbes op cit p.212

⁵⁹ Ibid., 263

⁶⁰Burhan op cit p.121-2

⁶¹Muhlisi interview.

⁶²Zhang op cit p.254

⁶³Vahit and Muhlisi interviews

⁶⁴"First-hand source" quoted in Whiting/Sheng op cit p.117

⁶⁵Vahit interview op cit

⁶⁶Linda Benson "Liberating Xinjiang from the rhetoric of Peaceful Liberation", paper presented at the meeting of the Association of Asian Studies, Washington April 1995, p.13.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Burhan, op. cit. in Benson, op. cit., 175

⁶⁹The same Assur Vahit interviewed by me in 1992

⁷⁰Higgins, Andrew in *The Independent*, London 1992, reprinted in *The Canberra Times*, 21 April 1992.

⁷¹Burhan op cit p 359

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Chen op cit, p.245

⁷⁴Ibid.