Externally Internal: Soviet Nationalities Policy and
Uyghur Uprisings in Sinkiang (Chinese Turkestan) 1920s – 1940s
by
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Introduction

Grasping the railings of the Tiananmen Gate on October 1, 1949, Mao Tse-tung announced his Party’s supremacy over mainland China, and proclaimed the establishment of a People’s Republic. Standing behind Mao was a Turkic man, who looked quite out of place amongst the top brass of the Party with his western suit and cap. The presence of this person, Saifuddin, was quite incredible, considering that he was nominally serving under Chiang Kai-shek, the existential arch-enemy of Mao. Days before his defection to the Communists, Saifuddin was still officially registered as an provincial official under the payroll of the Republic of China. Complicating this picture further was the fact that Saifuddin was clamouring for the complete separation of Sinkiang.
from China just five years earlier. Grasping a gun alongside fellow Uyghurs, Saifuddin participated in an insurgent assault on Kuldja (Yining) in 1944 with Soviet support, and styled himself as the educational minister for the East Turkestan Republic.

Reflecting the man’s fluid political affiliations, Saifuddin’s last name also changed drastically over the years. From his original Turkic surname of Akhun, the man took on a Russian substitute, Azizov, as he engaged in separatist agitation. Azizov then evolved into Azizi or Ai-ze-chin, as Saifuddin joined the ranks of the Chinese communists. The constant evolution of the leader’s last name has led to hilarious mixups. For example, Saifuddin recalled how one of his comrades were left confused when a Soviet advisor recommended that he contact a “Comrade Azizov” in 1944. The comrade then shared his frustrations with Saifuddin, without realizing that Azizov was him!1 Along with his complicated career, Saifuddin’s ever-changing family name is emblematic of the fluid and complex nature of Uyghur political consciousness in the twentieth century.

Using Saifuddin’s memoirs as a framework, I examine how the contours of Uyghur political expression was shaped by the intersection of Chinese and Soviet geopolitical interests. This memoir, however, has its limitations – as it was published under the watch of Peking, events have been tailored to water down nationalist sentiments. This was evident throughout the piece, as Saifuddin stressed that his fight for Uyghur rights was not a drive to root out the Han Chinese. To this effect, he took great pains to illustrate the friendly Han Chinese acquaintances that he had met throughout his life. For instance, Saifuddin stressed his gratitude to “Han colleagues,” who “taught him a lot” about the press during his brief stint as a journalist in 1937. Likewise, the man

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emphasized the fact that he was saved by a “Han army officer” when he was arbitrarily detained at a police checkpoint later that year.²

Drawing upon documents from the Soviet Politburo and the Foreign Ministry of the Republic of China, I argue that the shifting nature of Uyghur political consciousness was a product of Moscow’s external application of an existing internal policy on nationalities, tempered by shifting foreign policy objectives. Up until 1941, the Soviets worked to limit the expression of Uyghur nationalism, in order to obtain recognition from the Republic of China and secure economic concessions from the Governor of Sinkiang, Sheng Shih-tsai. The German invasion of the Soviet Union, however, saw a shift in this paradigm; as the Soviets appeared to be on the verge of collapse, Sheng elected to defect to the Nationalists and purged local communists. Countering Sheng’s intransigence, Moscow decided to throw its weight behind Uyghur revolutionaries, who sought the establishment of an East Turkestan Republic. The project for an East Turkestan Republic however, became an abortive exercise, after the Soviets secured strategic concessions from the Nationalists at the end of the Second Sino-Japanese War. With Outer Mongolia and Manchuria under its sphere of influence, Sinkiang proved to be an expendable card for Soviet officials. The fluid nature of Soviet involvement in Uyghur nation building has ultimately translated into the fluid nature of Uyghur politics.

Much like the messy nature of Uyghur political consciousness, the existing historiographical landscape for this topic is quite eclectic. Operating from the premise that China “could never be imperialist as it was the victim of imperialism,” orthodox Chinese scholars such as Liu Hsueh-yao framed the Uyghur uprisings as an reification of the idea that China was a victim

² Saifuddin, Memoir of Saifuddin, 253, 265.
of foreign aggression since the Opium War – by asserting that the region have always had “close and intimate ties” with the central authorities in China Proper, Liu was especially keen to prop up the idea that Sinkiang was Chinese territory “since antiquity.” Other scholars saw the uprisings as an explosive result of Chinese mismanagement in the province. Forbes attributed Uyghur unrest to the administrative structure employed by late-Qing and early-Republican officials, which imposed a double burden on local inhabitants. After Sinkiang was made a Chinese province in 1884, Chinese government structures were simply grafted onto the power structures of the local nobility. Having two government structures running concurrently with each other meant that local inhabitants would now have to pay taxes to two authorities, and bear the brunt of corrupt officials from both sides. Distancing himself from these Sinocentric conceptions of Uyghur political consciousness, Ondrej Klimes tackled the issue on its own terms. He mapped the politicization of the Uyghurs’ national discourse from the first East Turkestan Republic, founded in 1932, to the second East Turkestan Republic established as a result of an uprising in 1944. To Klimes, political leaders in Sinkiang mainly called for the overturn of what they saw as a double oppression: “when we think about our fatherland, our people, and our refugee life, there is not another people on the face of the earth that is as miserable as us……we are [entrapped under twofold tyranny], for we are under the oppression of the Chinese, and the Chinese are under the oppression of the Russians.”

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In line with a non-Sinocentric approach, I posit that the Uyghurs possessed a form of reactive agency when they sought to express a separate political identity. While their actions might have been constrained by great power politics, the Uyghurs were quick to move between these great powers in order to maximize gains. This flexibility has been illustrated by the fact that Saifuddin ended up on all sides of the conflict over the course of his political career: first as an Soviet backed insurgent, then as government official under the Kuomintang, and finally a communist cadre under the watchful eye of Peking. What is also missing from these works is the fact that the authors have not adequately addressed the question behind the emergence of “Uyghur” as a political category unifying the local residents of Sinkiang over the course of the first half of the twentieth century, and I seek to bridge this gap with my thesis.
Central Asia (Turkestan)

Background

Serving as a bridge between Central Asia and China Proper, Sinkiang’s history is complex, bearing witness to mass migrations of people. For the most part of its history, Sinkiang was comprised of eclectic polities, and saw a succession of Turkic and Mongol leaders. The projection of Chinese power into the region came only in 1750, as the Ching wanted to punish Amursana, a Dzungar Mongol leader who slaughtered Manchu forces at Khuldja. Sinkiang, however, was not conceptualized by the Manchu court as a part of their Empire at the time. Treating the region as a protectorate, the Manchus prohibited Han migration, and sought to preserve the status quo by soliciting the support of local princes, known as begs. Bearing testament to weak Manchu control over the area, Sinkiang fell under the control of Yaqub Beg, who moved in from Kokand in 1864;

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the prince declared an emirate over the region, and sought recognition from the British. Only after Yaqub Beg’s usurpation of their rule did the Manchus seriously reconsider the status of Sinkiang – fearful of any other incursions on their northwestern frontier, the Manchus re-constituted Sinkiang as a province after re-asserting control in 1884. Yaqub Beg’s bid for an emirate in Sinkiang, in turn, was the product of Imperial Russia’s projection of power into Central Asia. Seeking to establish a firm, southern boundary for the Tsarist realm, Russian troops seized Ak-Mechet (present day Kyzylorda) from the prince in 1853. Moving down the Syr Darya river, Russian troops established another outpost at Vernyi (present day Alma-Ata) the following year. From the two outposts, the Russians launched more military excursions, which would firmly place the Central Asian steppe under their control; following the fall of Tashkent and Bukhara in 1867 and 1876, General Kaufman became the first Governor General of Russian Turkestan. Squeezed out of power, Yaqub Beg was simply forced across the border into Sinkiang.

Fearing that Yaqub Beg would use Sinkiang as a base to contest their influence over the Central Asia, the Russians intervened. In 1871, General Kolpakovskii sent troops to capture the district of Khuldja, and proclaimed that the territory would be held “in trust” until the Manchu court was able to subdue Yaqub Beg’s rebellion. Peking was only able to recover the territory ten years later under onerous terms. According to the 1881 Treaty of St. Petersburg, the Manchu court agreed to pay nine million rubles for the retrocession of the Khuldja District east of the Khorgos River. For their part, the Russians were able to retain the westernmost sectors of the district, ostensibly so that 50,000 Tungans (Han Chinese Muslims) and Taranchis (Uyghurs from Khuldja)

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7 Millward, Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang, 137.
9 Levi, The Rise and Fall of Khoqand, 199.
could choose to resettle there if they wished. Apart from territorial losses and punitive penalties, Peking was also compelled to yield considerable economic concessions to St. Petersburg. Under the Treaty, Russian merchants were granted customs-free trading rights throughout Sinkiang and immunity from Chinese laws.\textsuperscript{10}

The imposition of Russian rule saw an integration of the province’s economy with Russian Turkestan, and local elites were more than happy to participate in the process. Local personalities were able to reap handsome profits by acting as middlemen in the grain trade; over the period of Russian occupation, merchants like Vali Bay were able to buy grain at 10-15 kopeks a pud, and resell it to the embattled Manchu forces in the rest of Sinkiang for eight rubles a pud, making a 6,000 percent profit. So lucrative were the deals that some of the elites decided to move their entire communities to Turkestan after the Russians withdrew from Khuldja in 1881. Refusing to sell grain at prices fixed by the Manchus, Vali Bay decided to emigrate to Semireche and mobilized Taranchis to move with him. To bring the Taranchis under his fold, Vali Bay forgave many debts, and distributed funds to whomever was willing to leave Khuldja.\textsuperscript{11}

The economic pull of Russian Turkestan also drew in many labour migrants from Kashgar, another frontier region of Sinkiang. Records of a Manchu diplomat indicated that as many as six to seven thousand Kashgaris travelled to Russian territory in 1894. From an annual exodus of six to seven thousand, numbers grew exponentially; rough estimates suggest that upwards of fifty thousand people moved from Kashgar to Russian Turkestan by the eve of the First World War. The influence and power of these merchant elders, or aqsaqals, were augmented further, as they

\textsuperscript{10} Millward, Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang, 135.
\textsuperscript{11} David Brophy, Uyghur Nation: Reform and Revolution on the Russia – China Frontier (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016), 69.
were entrusted by Urumchi to carry out quasi-consular functions across Russian Turkestan. The Sinkiang authorities were unable to station diplomats themselves, as the Russians refused to host Chinese consulates in their territory. As shall be discussed in next chapter, Taranchis and Kashgaris residing in Russian Turkestan would eventually serve as a launch-pad for the propagation of Uyghur political consciousness in the 1920s.
Sino-Soviet Frontier, Northwestern Sector, 1920s-1940s.

Chapter 1: Uyghur Political Consciousness as a Product of Soviet Nation Building

The Lack of “Uyghurness” in Saifuddin’s Childhood

Waking up one morning, a young Saifuddin broke out in a cold sweat, as his most favourite article of clothing, a shirt sewn by his biological mother, disappeared. The loss was shocking, for the boy had made sure to tuck it under the pillow when he went to sleep. After frantically flipping through every corner of the house, a maid approached, and quietly informed Saifuddin that his stepmother had snuck into his bedroom and tore the shirt up in a bout of jealousy. Faced with a permanent loss of his shirt, Saifuddin bawled, and ran to his father. Though his father attempted to make amends, by getting a new shirt handmade immediately, Saifuddin would have none of it.
As the tattered shirt evoked an image of a permanent break from “mama”, Saifuddin got his father to send him back to his biological mother.\textsuperscript{12}

In a locality to the north of Kashgar, the spring of 1915 welcomed Saifuddin into the world. Growing up in Artush, Saifuddin’s childhood was conspicuously absent of any undertones “Uyghur-ness.” Much of Saifuddin’s life over this period of time was marked by usual family intrigues. His parents separated when he was a toddler, as his father, Tash Akhun, spent a lot of time abroad, and focused on absorbing the latest dyeing techniques from Russia. Applying this knowledge back in Kashgar, Tash Akhun was able to produce large quantities of a new and improved version of sargaz, a local textile, at low cost. The merchant soon became Sinkiang’s main supplier of textiles, as his brand of sargaz was able to displace the Russian cloths which were dominating the market. The absence of nationalist expressions can also be attributed by the fact that Tash Akhun was a close partner of Manchu officialdom; acting as a commercial representative for Kashgar, Tash Akhun was responsible for obtaining Russian machinery to modernize the city’s mint.\textsuperscript{13}

Though Saifuddin harboured discontent against authorities at the time, it was initially directed at the traditional Muslim establishment, not the Chinese authorities. In his memoir, Saifuddin frowned upon his elementary education, which centred on reciting Arabic words without comprehension of their meaning.\textsuperscript{14} Learning only captured Saifuddin’s interest after his enrolment in a Jadid school, where mathematics and sciences were taught in addition to the Quran. Saifuddin’s time here was limited, however, for the teacher was soon driven out of town by local

\textsuperscript{12} Saifuddin, \textit{Memoir of Saifuddin}, 18.
\textsuperscript{13} Brophy, \textit{Uyghur Nation}, 103.
\textsuperscript{14} Saifuddin, \textit{Memoir of Saifuddin}, 6.
mullahs, who saw the new pedagogy as a perversion of traditional values.\textsuperscript{15} Although Saifuddin’s father managed to hire another foreign teacher to continue operating this new school, the teacher was also compelled to leave after he was stoned and beaten by religious authorities.\textsuperscript{16}

Saifuddin’s opposition to Chinese rule only came later in 1932, when he became incensed by the despotic rule of Ma Shao-wu, the Kashgari Circuit Commissioner. Commissioner Ma drew the ire of many, as he imposed government monopolies over many sectors of the local economy. Residents were forced to exchange their gold for worthless currency, and burdened with prohibitive taxes.\textsuperscript{17} Leaving home at the age of seventeen, the young man joined the forces of Osman Ali who led an assault on Kashgar the following year.\textsuperscript{18} Though this band of insurgents fought with great spirit, they were plagued with improper training and shortage of arms. Saifuddin recalled how the shoddy quality of weapons also led to tragic deaths by friendly fire: “bending down, the rifle on the comrade’s shoulder went off with a bang. When I turned back I saw [another comrade] slumped forward on the ground, with a river of blood flowing from his chest.”\textsuperscript{19} Nevertheless, the rag-tag army proved to be quite successful in battle. Seizing the old quarter of Kashgar in February 1933, they projected south and proceeded to capture Khotan.\textsuperscript{20} With the fall of Khotan, however, the rebels’ momentum soon ground to a halt; buttressed by Soviet support, the forces of General Sheng Shih-tsai flushed them out of the two cities by 1935. Moscow was loath to having Osman Ali close to its Central Asian frontier, as he was ideologically Pan-Turkic.

\textsuperscript{15} Saifuddin, \textit{Memoir of Saifuddin}, 19.
\textsuperscript{16} Saifuddin, \textit{Memoir of Saifuddin}, 32.
\textsuperscript{17} Forbes, \textit{Warlords and Muslims in Chinese Central Asia}, 74.
\textsuperscript{18} Saifuddin, \textit{Memoir of Saifuddin}, 118.
\textsuperscript{19} Saifuddin, \textit{Memoir of Saifuddin}, 134.
\textsuperscript{20} Forbes, \textit{Warlords and Muslims of Chinese Central Asia}, 76.
Even at this stage, there was little to no mention of “Uyghurs” – instead of noting the uprisings as an inter-ethnic conflict, Saifuddin stressed that it was only a “struggle against corruption and misgovernance.” 21

So where did this sense of being politically “Uyghur” come from? This chapter will explain how the “Uyghur” emerged as a separate political category among Sinkiang expatriates in Russian Turkestan in the wake of the power vacuum brought upon by the collapse of Tsarist authority in 1917. The propagation of a Uyghur political identity was soon restrained by Soviet authorities, as it did not fully conform with their nationalities policy. Transmission of this nascent Uyghur political consciousness from the Soviet Union back into Sinkiang was further prohibited by Moscow, as it sought to maintain trade relations with the existing powerbrokers in Sinkiang, and remain on good terms with Nationalist China. The porous Sino-Soviet border, however, would transcend these restrictions, leading to the migration of Uyghur ideas back into Sinkiang.

*The formation of Uyghur political consciousness in Soviet Turkestan*

Uyghur political consciousness first found expression in the throes of the Russian Civil War, as Soviet power sought to establish control over the borderlands of Turkestan. Soviet authorities were keen to support the formation of parallel social organizations in expatriate communities originating from Sinkiang, in a bid to contain and diminish the influence of Chinese *aqsaqals*. *Aqsaqals* served as quasi-diplomatic representatives of the Sinkiang provincial government, and were tasked with looking after the Chinese expatriates in Turkestan. As middlemen, they were often opportunistic and exploitative; a case in point is Hafiz Iminov, the *aqsaqal* for Kashgaris in Vernyi. Iminov exacted exorbitant fees to issue travel permits and

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authenticate marriage certificates, and was suspected of siphoning off donations intended for the Kashgari mosque in Vernyi.\textsuperscript{22} To this effect, Kadir Haji, the head of the Vernyi Muslim Bureau of the Communist Party of Turkestan, mobilized four hundred Kashgaris in 1920 and formed the Committee of Poor Chinese Subjects. The Committee elected a rival \textit{aqsaqal} to represent the community, and established a five-member committee to supervise his activities.\textsuperscript{23} Zharkent also saw a similar development, as Party member Abdullah Rozibakyev established a Taranchi Club in 1919. The two organizations merged together in 1921 to form the Union of Kashgari-Chinese Workers.

With the unification of Sinkiang expatriates came the solidification of “Uyghur” as a national category. At a 1921 Union Congress in Tashkent, Rozibakyev argued against the continual cultural stratification of Sinkiang expatriates as Taranchis, Kashgaris, and Tungans: “although we (are called by different names), we are all children of one father, and one mother, Uyghur.” The unification of all Sinkiang expatriates under a unified ethnic identifier was also crucial in the sense that it would streamline “revolutionary work.”\textsuperscript{24} Captivated with Rozibakyev’s speech, delegates voted to rename the Union as the “Revolutionary Union of Altishahri and Dzungarian Workers-Uyghur.” Brophy notes that the new name still reflected tensions within Sinkiang expatriates. Although Rozibakyev wanted to unify all expatriates under the “Uyghur” banner, he was also keen to ensure that “Altishahri” replaced “Kashgari.” Although “Altishahri” and “Kashgari” both referred to the area of Southern Sinkiang, the retention of “Kashgari” would insinuate that the “Taranchis” were merely a subgroup of “Kashgaris.”\textsuperscript{25} As discussed in the last chapter – although

\textsuperscript{22} Brophy, \textit{Uyghur Nation}, 170.
\textsuperscript{23} Brophy, \textit{Uyghur Nation}, 171.
\textsuperscript{24} Brophy, \textit{Uyghur Nation}, 185.
\textsuperscript{25} Brophy, \textit{Uyghur Nation}, 186.
both Taranchis and Kashgaris originated from the same area, they differ socially and temporally. Kashgaris were seasonal workers and merchants hailing from southern Sinkiang, whilst Taranchis were Sinkiang peasants who elected to move to Turkestan after the conclusion of the 1881 Treaty of St. Petersburg.

However, there existed a sharp divergence among the Soviets with respect to the utility and application of these nascent Uyghur organizations to Sinkiang itself. Whilst some saw Uyghur mobilization as a means to consolidate Soviet control over Turkestan, others saw it as a vehicle to export revolution into China. From the viewpoint of Janis Rudzutaks, the head of the Turkestan Bureau of the Comintern, Sinkiang could serve as a new springboard for world revolution, in light of setbacks on the European front. With the abortive attempt by Bela Kun to replicate the Soviet model in Hungary, and the routing of the Soviet army by Pilsudski’s troops at Warsaw in August 1920, Lenin’s original plan for world revolution under the leadership of an European proletariat was smashed. At the 1920 Baku Congress of the Comintern, Grigory Zinoviev proclaimed that the road to London lay not through Europe, but through the Far and Middle East: “the Communist International turns today to the peoples of the East and says to them: brothers, we summon you to a jihad, first of all against British Imperialism - the infantry of the East would reinforce the cavalry of the West!”26 In line with Zinoviev, Rudzutaks called for the establishment of Soviet Republics in Kashgaria and Dzungaria, in conformity with the division of the province’s productive capabilities along a north-south axis.27 Similarly, Rozibakyev wanted to use the Revolutionary Union of Altishahri and Dzungarian Workers to “acquaint Sinkiang radicals with Soviet

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27 Brophy, Uyghur Nation, 178.
perspectives on the revolution in Asia,” and even attempted to organize underground party conferences within the Chinese province.28

The idea of rekindling revolutionary activities through Sinkiang, however, was strongly opposed by the Soviet Foreign Ministry. From their end, supporting Rudzutak’s or Rozibakyev’s platform would seriously tarnish Soviet efforts to establish themselves as a responsible actor on the international arena, especially since the release of the Karakhan Manifesto in July 1919. According to this Manifesto, the Soviets pledged to annul all pre-revolutionary treaties and to return everything seized from China without compensation.29 Soviet diplomats were also anxious to secure Peking’s cooperation in its drive to eradicate elements of White forces, which were pouring into Sinkiang.30 Following the dissolution of the Provisional Government, Tsarist officials began distributing leaflets throughout the province, inciting Muslims to rise up and protect their brethren in Turkestan from Soviet onslaught.31 Words were soon backed up by guns: the spring of 1920 saw an influx of 8,000 White Russian troops into Tahcheng (Tarbagatai), led by White General Andrei Bakich. After much diplomatic wrangling, Soviet representatives were able to convince Governor Yang Zeng-hsin to allow the Red Army to cross the border and rout the Whites. Demonstrating their goodwill and respect for Chinese sovereignty over Sinkiang, Red Army troops immediately withdrew after their operations. Therefore, any adoption of plans to export Uyghur nationalism to Sinkiang would be highly counterproductive for Moscow at this time, for it would lead Chinese officials to believe that the Soviets were merely Red Tsarists.

30 From 1912 to 1927, the warlord – dominated Peiyang Government in Peking was widely recognized as the legitimate sovereign of the Republic of China.
Maintaining cordial relations with provincial authorities in Urumchi was also an economic necessity. Russian Turkestan was gripped by famine during this time, and the most expedient manner to ameliorate this crisis was to access the supply of grain across the border in the Yili Commandery. To this effect, the Soviets continually lobbied Urumchi and Peking to accept its delegates in the province, and their requests yielded results. In April 1920, the Yili Protocols were signed, allowing Soviets to station trade representatives. A few months later, the Chinese Government revoked the credentials of Tsarist diplomatic officials, and compelled Prince Kudashev to end his tenure as the Russian Ambassador.\textsuperscript{32} With the formation of the first Kuomintang-Communist Alliance, Rudzutak’s proposal was ultimately discarded, as the Soviets worked to support a friendly and unified China under the leadership of Sun Yat-sen and the Chinese Nationalists.

Supporting Uyghur separatism in any shape or form also went against the fundamental principle undergirding Soviet nationality policy, which was structured primarily to satisfy calls for self-determination \textit{within} existing borders.\textsuperscript{33} Ethnic separatism, in the eyes of Soviet planners, was

\textsuperscript{32} Brophy, \textit{Uyghur Nation}, 162.

\textsuperscript{33} The Soviet nationalities policy was the product of debates seeking to situate disparate nations under a unified plan for socialist state construction. After the establishment of Soviet power, some officials believed that the question of national and cultural autonomy should be rendered secondary to economic considerations; they saw the clamoring for nations as a redundant issue, for they would ultimately wither away. In September 1921, the State Planning Commission (Gosplan) tabled a proposal calling for the reorganization of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) into thirteen European and eight Asiatic economic-administrative provinces. The proposal also entailed the dissolution of existing national territorial units into economic units; for example, Ukraine was to be divided into a Southern Donbas mining district and a Southwestern agricultural district.

Officials within the People’s Commissariat for Nationalities (Narkomnats), on the other hand, argued that the recognition of ethnographic groups cannot be de-coupled from the execution of economic centralization. To their understanding, the former Tsarist realms is dotted with nations (\textit{natsional’nost’}) and nationalities (\textit{narod’nost’}). \textit{Natsional’nost} are ethnographic groups (Ukrainians, Byelorussians, Russians, and Georgians) deemed to be ready for socialism, as they
reactionary if it took place in a country under revolutionary leadership, and Nationalist China was deemed to be a comrade-in-arms at the time. As machinations for an “Uyghur” nation in the 1920s involved the separation of Sinkiang from a friendly power, the term was not recognized as a valid national category by Soviet ethnographers. They dismissed “Uyghur” as an umbrella designation referring to disparate tribal groups, and refused to include it in their databases. People who registered themselves as Uyghur were told to re-identify themselves as Kashgari, Tungan, Kalmyk, or Taranchi. As a consequence, the nascent Uyghur political movement in the Soviet Union ground to a halt. A petition for a Taranchi Uyghur autonomous district was shelved by authorities in 1926 for being “inexpedient and impossible.” Infighting among the various local leaders also handicapped the Uyghur political movement in the Soviet Union. The Revolutionary Union of Altishahri and Dzungarian Workers-Uyghur fell apart in the end, as many elected to defect from the Communists and join Islamic Basmachi rebels.

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have fully adopted the bourgeois modes of production. *Narod’nost*, on the other hand, refers to less-developed national groupings at the pre-capitalist stage on the historical timeline, and feudal societies lacking a “bourgeois democratic national movement.” With this in mind, Narkomnats stressed that the state should expedite nation-building amongst the *narod’nost*, so that they can achieve the same level of economic development as the *natsional’nost*. Only with the transitioning of all *narod’nost* into *natsional’nost* can the state be re-forged as a socialist nation. Expediting the growth of national groups under the watch of Moscow would also enable the state to pre-empt any separatist designs. The Soviet government eventually established a hybrid system, whereby economic units would be established within national territorial units. At the Twelfth Party Congress in April 1923, delegates passed a directive to create an agricultural province in the North Caucasus and a mining province in the Urals, whilst declaring that autonomous national territorial units are sovereign, having the right to refuse its inclusion into economic administrative regions. For more details, see Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*, (London: Cornell University Press, 2005), 43.

The Transmission of Uyghur political identity into Sinkiang

The physical containment of Uyghur identity and political activism within Soviet Turkestan, however, could not stem ideological fluidity. While expatriates could not expect Moscow’s direct sponsorship in fomenting an autonomous regime in Sinkiang, ideas could be still be transplanted simply by their return to the province. Therefore, when thrashing out the terms of the Yili Protocols, Governor Yang Zeng-hsin specifically demanded that Moscow refrain from disseminating its political platform among Chinese Uyghur subjects residing in Soviet territory. The Governor also sought Moscow’s assistance in prohibiting the attendance of Sinkiang travellers at Soviet schools, so that they would not be exposed to speeches and publications.37 Aware that the flow of ideas into Sinkiang might prove useful in the future, Soviet delegates refused Yang’s demands. They quipped that prohibiting Chinese travellers from reading the newspaper whilst transiting through Russian territory was simply an impossibility. Unable to forestall the transmission of Soviet ideas to Chinese Uyghurs, the Governor noted with resignation in 1924 that Russian Uyghurs were bound to collude with Chinese Uyghurs. Although the provincial authorities could attempt to clamp down on the politicization of Uyghurs in China, countermeasures are “destined to fail,” for the Soviet position is “far superior.”38

Conforming with the Governor’s concerns, the fluidity of Soviet ideology across the border would ultimately disrupt the existing political order in Sinkiang. Through their travels in Turkestan, Chinese Uyghurs began to see the adoption of Soviet ideas as a pathway to their nation’s modernization, and rejuvenation. In fact, most Uyghur terms relating to machinery are

37 Jacobs, Xinjiang and the Modern Chinese State, 70.
38 Jacobs, Xinjiang and the Modern Chinese State, 66.
Soviet neologisms, such as zhurnal (journal), fabrika (factory), and khemiye (chemistry).\textsuperscript{39} Given that Sinkiang did not see any economic and social reforms since the Manchu era, the exposure of Chinese Uyghurs to Soviet education and technology could lend itself to be a confusing, and jarring process. After returning from the battlefields of Kashgar and Khotan, Saifuddin decided to escape from the politics of home and study in the Soviet Union. During their trek to Andizhan, Saifuddin and his classmates were confounded by a succession of big “glass houses” which were mobile and “inhabited by lots of people”. It was only later, after a conversation with a local Uzbek bystander, that the group realized that the “glass houses” were actually buses that they were supposed to hop on to get to their destination. Not completely believing the local’s words, the group broke in two, with Saifuddin electing to walk five hours to the city, “just to be on the safe side.”\textsuperscript{40} During their first night in the Soviet Union, Saifuddin was also mesmerized by the “magical, glass ball” that was able to illuminate his bedroom all night. As this was also his first encounter with a lightbulb, Saifuddin had a sleepless night, for he couldn’t turn it off.\textsuperscript{41} Over the course of his stay in Tashkent, Saifuddin gained firsthand experience with a factory’s production line, and learned about the mechanization of cotton-farming.\textsuperscript{42}

The equation of Soviet education as the only pathway to national rejuvenation among Chinese Uyghur minds was further entrenched by the province’s repression of alternative discourses for modernization. Prior to the introduction of Soviet power, some Uyghur community leaders attempted to introduce Jadid teaching, a modern variant of Ottoman education based on the reforms outlined by the Young Turks. Reformists who subscribed to Jadidism sought to create

\textsuperscript{39} Klimes, \textit{Struggle by the Pen: the Uyghur Discourse of Nation and National Interest}, 149.
\textsuperscript{40} Saifuddin, \textit{Memoir of Saifuddin}, 228.
\textsuperscript{41} Saifuddin, \textit{Memoir of Saifuddin}, 225.
\textsuperscript{42} Saifuddin, \textit{Memoir of Saifuddin}, 240.
a new Pan-Turkic identity around modern literature, mathematics, and science. Unlike the secular Young Turks, however, Jadids believed that the adoption of modern pedagogy served Islamic utilities; according to writers such as Fitrat, only through the advancement of human faculties can Allah’s final message be received. At the turn of the twentieth century, prominent merchant Husenbay Haji established a secular school in Kashgar. Known by locals as the Huseyinye, the school’s curriculum centred on the propagation of geography, physical education, and modern vernacular Turkish. Following the establishment of the Republic of China, Kashgar merchant Musabay also contracted Ahmet Kemal, a Turkish teacher, to set up a Pan-Turkic school in the city, in 1913. Kemal’s school focused not only on secular education, but the inculcation of Sino-Turkish collaboration against Western colonialism. This was illustrated in one of Kemal’s textbooks; although the piece stressed that the residents of Kashgar belonged to the “Turk race,” they belong to “Chinese Turkestan.” Such schools faced considerable opposition from the clergy, traditional powerbrokers in Sinkiang communities, who saw them as an affront to their maktabs and an assault on Islamic values. Education in the maktabs mostly revolved around the rote memorization of Quranic phrases. Husenbay’s and Musabay’s early attempts to introduce a Turkic variant of secular education was eventually shutdown by Governor Yang Zeng-hsin, who suspected that the schools were a vehicle to draw loyalty to the Sultan, and thereby erode his authority within the province. Terminating the operation of these schools was also a diplomatic necessity at the time, for China maintained neutrality during the First World War. Allowing

43 Klimes, Struggle by the Pen: the Uyghur Discourse of Nation and National Interest, 70.
45 Brophy, Uyghur Nation, 138.
46 Klimes, Struggle by the Pen: the Uyghur Discourse of Nation and National Interest, 76.
Turkish teachers to roam freely right at the border would be perceived by the Russians as a provocation.

**Conclusion**

In sum, Uyghur political consciousness was a product of Soviet nation building following the Russian Civil War. The inculcation of Uyghur identity was restrained geographically to Soviet Turkestan due to geopolitical constraints of the time. Faced with a famine and an existential threat from the Whites, the Soviets could not afford to allow China to turn into another hostile neighbour. The transmission of Uyghur political consciousness to Sinkiang was an inevitability, however, as it became identified by locals as the pathway to modernity. The pre-eminence of the Soviet brand of Uyghur political identity was further assured by Urumchi’s suppression of alternative discourses like Jadidism.

**Chapter 2: Navigating Turkic/Uyghur political consciousness through intersecting Soviet-Chinese Geopolitics, 1930-1942.**

*“It All Started with a Parting Shot”*

On July 7, 1928, Governor Yang Zeng-hsin attended a graduation ceremony at Urumchi law school. As the guest of honour was reaching out for a glass of wine, a waiter whipped out his pistol and fired at him point-blank. As shocked bystanders scurried away, seven other waiters rushed forward to shoot the governor. With the remnants of his life seeping out from his chest, the bloodied governor was “superb in death.” After glaring at his shooters and demanding to know who had the audacity to kill him (his exact words were “what the fuck!?”), he slowly fell forward and went to sleep. As the Governor shut his eyes for the last time, provincial secretary Fan Yao-
nan (the mastermind of the assassination) rushed forward to send his two parting shots. Fan, however, was unable to seize the seals of office. Suspecting foul play, Chin Shu-jen, the head of the provincial militia, detained and executed him.

Following the death of Yang, the province was submerged in a sea of chaos, as rival factions sought to fill the power vacuum. As warlord Ma Chung-ying made a thrust into the Taklamakan desert of southern Xinjiang from the neighbouring province of Kansu, General Sheng Shih-tsai (a Nationalist Chinese military advisor for the dead Governor) struggled to hold the capital. Meanwhile, the western reaches of the province served as a base for Sabit Damolla and Khoja Niyaz Haji, who wished to establish an Islamic theocracy separate from the Republic of China; this insurgency erupted after the provincial authorities stripped the power of local begs and appropriated Uyghur land in favour of Han Chinese settlers.

Joining forces with Osman Ali in Khotan, Damolla and Niyaz established an “Islamic Republic of Eastern Turkistan” in 1934. With this Islamic Republic, Damolla and Niyaz sought to revive Jadidism in the province; modern knowledge (ilim) and education (ma’arip) was propounded by the two as a “basic pre-condition to progress and the well-being of the nation.” Unlike the expatriates clamouring for recognition as “Uyghurs” in the Soviet Union, the Islamic Republic sought to instill a Pan-Turkic identity. Pamphlets circulating in the breakaway state at the time emphatically declared that “East Turkestan is a Turkic territory. It is necessary that there are Turks living in Turkestan and there is Turkic government in Turkestan.”

Reflecting on his

47 Jacobs, Xinjiang and the Modern Chinese State, 76 and Forbes, Warlords and Muslims in Chinese Central Asia, 36.
48 Klimes, Struggle by the Pen, 121.
49 Klimes, Struggle by the Pen, 146.
50 Klimes, Struggle by the Pen, 142.
participation in the Islamic Republic years later, Masud Sabri also stressed the Turkic nature of the indigenous inhabitants in Sinkiang: “All people who speak Turkic in Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Turkestan, Kashgar, China, Manchuria [and] Crimea, are Turks…who feel the same pride and pain.”51 Damolla’s and Niyaz’s state project would eventually elicit strong opposition from Moscow, as it was decidedly anti-Soviet in orientation. As a case in point, in Life of East Turkistan, a magazine issued by the Islamic Republic at the time, writers attributed Chinese oppression to the adoption of “Russifying policies” and “Bolshevik policies” which “infringed on the property, lives, chastity, and dignity of the nation.”52 Though Saifuddin fought under the banner of Osman Ali, he became quite critical of this Islamic Republic after becoming more Soviet in orientation through his studies in Tashkent; remarking later in his memoir, the man dismissed this Islamic Republic as a movement corrupted by “reactionary” and “imperialist” intrigues.53

This chapter will outline how Uyghur political consciousness was drastically curbed by Moscow to suit its foreign policy objectives, in response to the changing dynamics of politics in Sinkiang and China Proper from 1930 to 1942. Uyghur issues took a backseat during this time, as the Soviets were primarily interested in keeping the Japanese forces tied down in Southern China. Moscow did not want to see the Sino-Japanese War spill over into Siberia, and risk a two-front war with Imperial Japan and Nazi Germany.

51 Klimes, Struggle by the Pen, 206.
52 Klimes, Struggle by the Pen, 137.
53 Saifuddin, Memoir of Saifuddin, 160.
“Uyghurs for now Goodbye, to Sheng we say hi”: Why the Soviets Supported Sheng Shih-tsai, and Its Implications for the Uyghur National Movement

With his credentials as a Nationalist Chinese military advisor, Sheng Shih-tsai seemed to be the last person who would end up with Soviets by his side. Relations between the Nationalist Chinese and the Soviets was virtually non-existent in 1930, as Chiang Kai-shek sought to purge the Communists from every aspect of Chinese political life. However, all of this changed by the spring of 1933, when the Nationalist Government sent Minister Huang Mu-sung to mediate between the warring factions in the province. Acting outside of Nanking’s orders, Huang plotted with Ma Chung-ying to establish a provincial government with himself as head.\footnote{Chao-hsien Teng in Combined Memoirs of Teng Chao-hsien and Sheng Shih-tsai, ed. Tsai Teng-shan (Taipei: Independent Author, 2014), 106.} Perceiving Huang’s adventurism as Nanking’s attempt to liquidate him, Sheng re-branded himself as a Communist and appealed for Soviet support. In a June 1934 letter to “Comrade” Stalin, the embattled general professed that he had always been a closeted Marxist ever since his studies as a university student in Japan. The October Revolution only served to strengthen his support for Marxism: “with (1917), my faith in the triumph of Communism received even great reinforcement in its correctness.” Sheng even portrayed his initial move to Sinkiang as a revolutionary decision worthy of Moscow’s recognition: “I decided to leave Nanking (to escape the claws) of Kuomintang members who had tried to lure me (into their orbit).” To this end, the general declared his intent to “root out” the influence of the Kuomintang in Sinkiang, and assist the “Chinese Soviet Government” (the Chinese Communist Party) in a “joint offensive” to liquidate Nanking, under the “leadership of the Comintern.” The desperation in Sheng’s writing was quite palpable; pre-empting an outright Soviet rejection, the general also implicitly floated the idea of political asylum:
“if the Comintern has any doubts with respect to me, I would be happy to engage in the works of Lenin and Stalin anywhere in a quiet village (in Soviet Russia).”

Stalin was not impressed with Sheng’s overtures. Upon receiving this letter, the Soviet leader remarked to Garegin Apresov, his representative in Urumchi, that Sheng’s letter amounted to bluff and was nothing more than garbage: “his letter made a depressing impression, only a provocateur having no idea of Marxism could have written it.” Replying to Sheng a month later, Stalin further rejected Sheng’s self-characterization as a Communist, by addressing the letter to “Mr. Sheng,” instead of “Comrade Sheng” (The fact that “Mr. Sheng” was used instead of “Governor Sheng” also suggests that the Soviets were reluctant to recognize Sheng Shih-tsai’s leadership at the time). Stalin went on to repudiate Sheng’s idea for a rapid implementation of communism in Sinkiang at the time, as the province lacked the basis for a revolution: “Sinkiang is a backward country, it still does not have industry, it has almost no working class, and culturally it is at a low level.” Let alone a transition to communism, the province should tread carefully when it begins to introduce social reforms and institute a market economy on the people. To this effect, the Soviet leader also called on Sheng to retract his recent comments on equal rights for women, because such pronouncements are premature: “Sinkiang is backwards with an overwhelmingly Muslim population.” Stalin ended his letter by saying that Sheng should not obsess himself with securing Party membership: “it is not a Party Card that makes a person a Communist, but his actual devotion to the idea of Communism.”

Though the letter appeared to be disparaging towards Sheng, the Soviet leadership furnished military support for the general. In his memoir, former Interior Minister Teng Chao-hsien recalled that Moscow provided three million rubles worth of arms to Sheng’s army, and sent thirty Soviet planes to bomb and paralyze the forces of Ma Chung-ying, who had already encircled Urumchi. Teng noted that the Soviets took extra care to affix the roundels of the Chinese Air Force on these planes during the operation, in order not to arouse suspicions from the Chinese Government. Moscow also indirectly provided Sheng with a fresh supply of manpower, by choosing to repatriate battle-hardened Northeastern troops of Ma Chan-shan to the Republic of China through Sinkiang (Ma Chan-shan and his forces had no choice but to cross into the Soviet Union, as the imperial Japanese flushed them out from Manchuria). Once the Northeastern troops crossed the border, Sheng conscripted them into his provincial army. With Sheng’s expanded army backed by Soviet military hardware bearing down on his troops, Ma Chung-ying was forced to withdraw to Khotan at the southern reaches of the province by 1935. The Soviets were eventually able to mediate a ceasefire between Sheng and Ma. The latter’s forces were granted official status as a division within the provincial army, and Ma himself retired to the Soviet Union, ostensibly for military training.59

The contradiction between Moscow’s criticism of Sheng’s opportunism on one hand, and its collaboration with the general’s administration on the other hand, was borne out of geopolitical considerations. In his letter to Sheng, Stalin stressed that the provincial leader should re-frame his relations with Nanking through the lens of anti-imperialism. Engineering a separation of Sinkiang

58 The Northeastern troops was the first Nationalist Chinese division that tried to flush the Japanese invaders out of Manchuria in 1931.
from the Republic of China at this time would be a great error, tantamount to supporting the very imperialists that Sheng claimed to despise:

“whatever mistakes the Nanking government has made it is nevertheless on a path toward fighting the foreign imperialist enemies of China. Now, when the imperialists are tearing province by province from China and trying to subject it under its rule, the task is to fight against everything that can weaken China. The task is especially relevant for the leaders of the province of Sinkiang, where there are few Chinese and open tendencies to secede exist. That is why we advise you to maintain a policy of complete loyalty with Nanking with respect to the fight against imperialism. (emphasis added)”

Whatever misgivings they had with the Nationalist Government’s suppression of Communists, the Soviets were anxious to support Chiang Kai-shek’s struggle against the Japanese. As prospects for concluding a Non-Aggression Pact with Hitlerite Germany was remote at the time, the last thing Moscow wanted was for Nanking to capitulate to Tokyo. With Nanking’s capitulation, Tokyo might be emboldened to launch military actions against Siberia, pitting the Soviets in a destructive, two-front war. Soviet suspicions were not assuaged by events on the ground, which seemed to indicate that the Japanese had interests in expanding their military activities north of China. In Sinkiang, a Japanese “businessman,” later identified as agent Tadashi Onishi, was seen tailing behind the forces Ma Chung-ying as he was advancing on Urumchi. At the same time, Japanese militarists propped up an “autonomous Mongolian government” encompassing the northern provinces of Chahar and Suiyuan, which suggested that Tokyo had plans to contest the Soviets’

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eminent position over Outer Mongolia. With the imposition of communist power in Urga after 1921, Outer Mongolia, otherwise known as the “Mongolian People’s Republic,” was the first client state the Soviets ever had.

Such apprehensiveness of Japanese expansionist designs, in turn, translated into expanded military cooperation between the Soviet Union and the Republic of China. From 1937 to 1941, the Soviet Union was the largest provider of war materiel to China. Commanders such as Zhukov and Chuikov, who would later be remembered for their actions on the European theatre of war, all served stints as advisors on Chiang Kai-shek’s General Staff. Just a single transaction alone is enough to illustrate the magnitude of Soviet aid. For instance, on March 29, 1938, the Chinese government tabled an order for 94 Polikarpov I-16 fighters, 62 Polikarpov I-153 biplanes, 62 Tupolev ANT-40 bombers, and various other cannons and ammunition to outfit 20 divisions. As a province that physically linked the Soviet Union with the rest of China, Sinkiang served as the major entrepôt for arms during this period of time. The territory would funnel military supplies into China, and serve as a transit point for raw materials making their way to the Soviet Union. As Chinese currency was unstable at the time, Nanking paid for Soviet armaments with shipments of minerals. According to diplomatic records, the Chinese authorities decided to send 3,000 tons of antimony, 2,000 tons of tin and 2,000 tons of tungsten in return for Soviet shipments in March of 1939. To accelerate their delivery of fighter planes to the Chinese Air Force, the Soviets even scrambled to set up an assembly plant in Urumchi.

However, one should not assume that the Soviets were unconditionally invested in supporting a unified Chinese state under Chiang Kai-shek. If one were to re-read Stalin’s

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62 Central Committee of the Kuomintang, Chan-shi Wai-chiao 2 (Taipei: Kuomintang, 1981), 486.
63 Central Committee of the Kuomintang, Chan-shi Wai-chiao 2, 486.
instructions to Sheng again, one would notice a loophole; the Governor was advised to “maintain a policy of complete loyalty with Nanking with respect to the fight against imperialism. (emphasis added)” By framing their calls for unity with qualifications like “with respect,” the Soviets harboured other designs for the province. While Moscow did not challenge Sinkiang’s official status as a Chinese province, it seemed to be keen on turning the province into an economic protectorate. Documents from the time showed that the Soviets wielded absolute control over the province’s economic development. Minutes from a Politburo meeting in the spring of 1936 contained an order granting Sinkiang a reduction in its exports to the Soviet Union due to a cattle plague that year. Original orders for an output of 2,000 tons of cotton, 350,000 heads of livestock, and 5,475 tons of wool was reduced to requests for 1,000 tons of cotton, 250,000 heads of livestock, and 4,675 tons of wool. Moscow also steered Sinkiang’s monetary policy; Soviet financial advisors took control of the provincial bank, and handed out 500,000 rubles of loans to herders and farmers, hoping to spur agricultural production. On March 17, 1936, the Politburo allocated two million rubles for a geological expedition in the province. Members of this expedition were tasked to find and secure new sources for tin, tungsten, and molybdenum. The mandate of this expedition was extended for an extra year in 1937, so that surveyors could work to expand the reserves for tin in the Yining, and deliberate on the feasibility of building a mine in Yarkand.

64 “Concerning Soviet Trade with Sinkiang,” June 17, 1936, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive.
65 “VKP (B) CC Politburo Decree Concerning Sinkiang,” March 22, 1935, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive.
Tightening their grip on the province’s natural resources, the Central Committee of the Politburo instructed *Narkomstsvetmet* (People’s Commissariat for Metals) to get Sheng to sign a concession agreement in October 1940. This agreement would enable the Soviets to “*explore, prospect, and exploit* the deposits of tin (and minerals associated with it) on the territory of Sinkiang” unimpeded for 50 years. Confident that they would obtain such a concession from Sheng, the Soviets began allocating resources for long-term mining in the province, *even as negotiations were still going on*. On March 7, 1941, the Central Committee of the Politburo tasked the NKVD with documenting 260 technical and managerial personnel drafted to work in a future concession in Sinkiang, and directed the Red Army to dispatch a RP-5 aircraft to guard their activities. A few months later, Moscow concluded another agreement with Urumchi, gaining access to the Tushantze Refinery. Although the agreement was framed as a “partnership,” with net profits being “equally distributed” to the contracting parties, Urumchi conceded much. Control over the refinery was placed in Soviet hands; the director and the chief engineer of the refinery were to be appointed by the Soviet Commissariat for the Petroleum Industry. The provincial authorities were also made to set aside plots of land for exploration and exploitation of oil “free of charge.”

However, the Soviets were careful not to challenge Sheng’s leadership within Sinkiang, in order to maintain a semblance of Chinese sovereignty over the province. In a 1935 Politburo directive issued to Consul Apresov, the latter was ordered to remove Soviet officials “exhibiting

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68 “Excerpt on Sinkiang from Minutes No.21 of the VKP(B) CC Politburo Meetings,” October 26, 1940, *History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive.*
attempts to command or interfere with the affairs of local authorities.” NKVD agents were also prohibited from undertaking any action “capable of having any political importance.” Therefore, Stalin was alarmed when Sheng floated the idea of placing the province on a path to join the Soviet Union the following year; the Soviet leader immediately instructed Apresov to inform the governor that Moscow would not support any actions damaging the “territorial integrity” of China. However, to ensure Sheng’s deference to Soviet interests, the governor was secretly inducted into the Bolshevik Party in 1938. Even with the governor as a Party member, the Soviets did not completely trust him. The Politburo issued a secret order the following year, which transferred command of the provincial army to the Soviet Commissariat of Defense.

As Sinkiang was seen primarily as an economic and political appendage useful in diverting Japanese attention away from Siberia, Uyghur national consciousness was reined in by the Soviets at this time. Working with Governor Sheng, Chinese Comintern officials (such as Huang Shoucheng) attempted to implement an unitary nationalities policy. Under this policy, “Uyghur” was not conceptualized as an umbrella term encompassing all non-Han ethnic groups within the province, but a narrow term referring to Turks who did not self-identify as Kazakh, Uzbek, Kirghiz or Tatar. Therefore, “Uyghurs” were deemed as one of 14 “equal” ethnic groups in the province, working together to oppose Japanese imperialism. This had the effect of rendering a majority into

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73 “A Conversation Between Cdes. Stalin, Molotov, and Voroshilov and Governor Sheng Shih-tsai which occurred in the Kremlin,” September 2, 1938, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive.
74 “Concerning Soviet troops in Sinkiang,” January 10, 1939, History and Public Policy Program Archive.
75 Wang, East Turkestan Independence Movement, 1930s to 1940s, 90.
a minority. Whilst “Uyghurs” constituted 78% (2,900,173 of 3,720,051) of the provincial population in 1938, they were treated in the same category as “Tatars,” who accounted for only 0.12% of the population (4,601 of 3,730,051).\(^7\) The principle of “ethnic equality” was buttressed by Sheng’s “Six Great Policies,” which again emphasized that all ethnic groups should work together to modernize the province and institute a peaceful and transparent government, with the “kinship of the Soviet Union.”\(^7\) In concert with this official narrative of a “harmonious” province, Sheng successfully co-opted Khoja Niyaz Haji (the leader of an abortive “Islamic Turkestan” in western Sinkiang) and made him Deputy Governor.

With the leader of the Islamic Republic deferring to Urumchi, the province also saw a re-fashioning of Uyghur national discourse away from Pan-Turkism. This was demonstrated by the first edition of the *New Life* newspaper issued in August 1934. Uyghur editors, who previously worked under the Islamic Republic, openly called for the eradication of factionalism, and asserted that “Uyghurs, Hans, Mongols, Tungans, Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, are children of the homeland.”\(^7\) At the same time, the writers also declared that none of the ethnographic groups are the Sinkiang’s “stepchild,” as if implying that the Han Chinese have just as much claim on the province as indigenous inhabitants.\(^7\) Therefore, those who have previously espoused separatism should “concentrate on the unity and friendship of all peoples of Sinkiang” and hold hands with Sheng’s government, which will “give each nationality justice, rightfulness, and freedom to facilitate reforms” to improve their political, cultural, and political conditions.\(^8\)

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76 Klimes, *Struggle by the Pen*, 154.
77 Klimes, *Struggle by the Pen*, 152.
78 Klimes, *Struggle by the Pen*, 156.
79 Klimes, *Struggle by the Pen*, 163.
80 Klimes, *Struggle by the Pen*, 164.
“East Turkestan” and “people of East Turkestan” also disappeared from Uyghur publications, and were substituted by designations more acceptable to the Chinese - “Xinjiang (Sinkiang)” and “Xinjiangliq (Sinkiangese).”\textsuperscript{81} This was quite a departure from a year before, when the same editors castigated the Han Chinese as outsiders, “licentious oppressors” who have “obstructed national publishing and publishing,” and “gave freedom to prostitution and immoral debauchery.”\textsuperscript{82} Apart from calling for the expulsion of Han Chinese from the province, the editors also challenged Sinocentric conception of East Asia, going as far to claim that that “new scientific methods have proven that the Turkestani nation is the most ancient and civilized nation in the world,” and that “there was no doubt that Peking was founded by the Turks.”\textsuperscript{83}

For its part, Moscow allocated resources to educate Turkic youths in Soviet Central Asia. With the institution of secular education, Moscow hoped to create a new pool of administrators that Sheng could draw on to govern his province. In a decree issued by the Politburo in September 1935, officials in Soviet Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan were ordered to open up 30 spots for Sinkiang youth seeking to study agriculture. A few months later, the Politburo released over 1.2 million rubles to support these students in the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{84} On June 17\textsuperscript{th}, 1936, another directive was issued, permitting 100 Sinkiang students to study at the Administrative Law Faculty of the Central Asian State University in Tashkent.\textsuperscript{85} Saifuddin’s education in the Soviet Union was a product of the Politburo’s decision in 1935. During his time in Tashkent, he familiarized himself with

\textsuperscript{81} Klimes, \textit{Struggle by the Pen}, 159.
\textsuperscript{82} Klimes, \textit{Struggle by the Pen}, 137.
\textsuperscript{83} Klimes, \textit{Struggle by the Pen}, 134.
\textsuperscript{84} “Concerning the Maintenance of Peoples from Sinkiang,” March 29, 1936, \textit{History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive}.
\textsuperscript{85} “Concerning Soviet Trade with Sinkiang,” June 17, 1936, \textit{History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive}. 
mathematics and geography. Outside of class, he was shown how a modern production line worked, and took part in harvesting cotton.86 Captivated by the modern infrastructure in the Soviet Union, Saifuddin recalled how students like him would daydream and wonder why the hand on the statue of Lenin in the town square was pointing south; after thinking for a while, they joked among themselves “he’s indicating that the Soviets should march south and liberate Sinkiang!”87

As enumerated in the last chapter, Chinese Uyghurs began to see the adoption of Soviet modernism as a pathway to their nation’s rejuvenation, through their baptism in Soviet education.

“To Uyghurs we say hi, To Sheng we say goodbye” Moscow’s Rupture with Sheng Shih-tsai, and Its Implications for the Uyghur National Movement

What appeared to be an intimate partnership between the Soviets and Sheng, however, began to unravel in 1937. As provincial administration became heavily dependent on the expertise of Soviet advisors, Sheng began to worry that Moscow would replace him with someone else. His fears were exacerbated when reports on Ma’s military training in the Soviet Union came to light. Allegedly, Ma was conducting war games with his Soviet counterparts, and devising ways for the Red Army to launch an offensive against Sinkiang should the need arise.88 Deciding to pre-empt what he saw as a Soviet takeover, the governor purged his Comintern advisors in 1937. Masking his purge as a faithful replication of Stalinist eliminations of “Trotskyites,” Sheng was able to assuage Soviet suspicions. To further curb the influence of Moscow, Sheng began looking to draft Chinese Communists to serve in his government. And with his luck, a group of Chinese Communists were transiting through the province at the time; after much persuasion, the governor

86 Saifuddin, Memoir of Saifuddin, 241.
87 Saifuddin, Memoir of Saifuddin, 228.
88 Wang, The East Turkestan Independence Movement, 1930s to 1940s, 101.
was able to convince the leader of the group to stay and lead the education ministry.\textsuperscript{89} For their part, the Chinese Communists were more than happy to collaborate with Sheng, as they sought to expand their sphere of influence. Mao Tse-min, the brother of Mao Tse-tung, served as the financial secretary of Sinkiang before he too was purged in 1942.\textsuperscript{90}

To distance himself from the Soviets, Sheng began rolling back his nationalities policy in the province as well. As the governor was mulling over the best way to do this, a local Uyghur rebellion broke out in Kashgar in April 1937. Led by Mahmut, some Uyghur militias decided to fight their way out of Sinkiang and defect to India. Fearful that this uprising would metastasize and envelope the entire province, Moscow immediately sent agent Smirnov to mediate between Mahmut and Sheng.\textsuperscript{91} At the same time, the Politburo instructed agent Frinovsky to push General Ma Hu-shan (the brother of Sheng Shih-tsai’s rival Ma Chung-ying), to detain and disarm these militias.\textsuperscript{92} When Ma was not forthcoming with his support, the Politburo decided to intervene directly and sent six fighters and six armoured vehicles to “assist the Chinese” in suppressing Mahmut’s uprising.\textsuperscript{93} The Soviets were also anxious to wipe out Mahmut in particular, for reports emerged that he was maintaining clandestine communications with the Nationalist Government.\textsuperscript{94}

As Mahmut was once the protégé of the deputy provincial chairman, Sheng also used the incident as a pretext to purge Khoja Niyaz Haji and other indigenous members of his cabinet. Niyaz was

\textsuperscript{89} Wang, \textit{The East Turkestan Independence Movement, 1930s to 1940s}, 103.
\textsuperscript{90} Wang, \textit{The East Turkestan Independence Movement, 1930s to 1940s}, 110.
\textsuperscript{91} “Concerning A Peace Settlement in Kashgar,” April 7, 1937, \textit{History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive}.
\textsuperscript{92} “Concerning Military Operations in Sinkiang,” April 16, 1937, \textit{History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive}.
\textsuperscript{93} “Concerning Support for Chinese troops in Kashgaria,” June 15, 1937, \textit{History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive}.
\textsuperscript{94} Wang, \textit{The East Turkestan Independence Movement, 1930s to 1940s}, 106.
later executed by Sheng on charges of treason.\textsuperscript{95} Reflecting Sheng’s shift away from the institution of nationalities policy, mention of “Uyghurs” began to disappear altogether in provincial publications; \textit{New Life} was itself shut down in May 1937.\textsuperscript{96}

Saifuddin also fell victim to Sheng’s ethnic clampdown. In his memoirs, the inklings to the governor’s change in policy came with his return trip from the Soviet Union. Once he and his colleagues crossed the border back into the province, Saifuddin noticed that authorities treated them very coolly. Although the students were informed that Sheng was waiting for them in Urumchi, they were only provided with a rundown horse cart for their trek. When the students questioned officials, they were told that no automobiles were available, for they were being used to transport supplies to aid the fight against Japan. Once the group of students reached Urumchi, they were not welcomed by the governor. Instead they were held at a rundown building, and fed little strips of bread per day. Because he pursued an education in the Soviet Union, Saifuddin was exiled to the remote settlement of Chuguchak. Although Saifuddin managed to get by as an editor for a couple of months, he was eventually fired due to pressure from the provincial authorities. He was reduced to working as a part-time sweeper in a theatre. Working his way up, Saifuddin was nevertheless able to disseminate political ideas through theatre production. He recalled participating in the direction of “United Front,” which tells the story of farmers burying a prince alive, after many years of oppression.\textsuperscript{97} With exile being imposed on him, Saifuddin was prohibited from leaving the settlement’s limits. This arbitrary restriction was to leave a dark mark in his life;

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\textsuperscript{95} Wang, \textit{The East Turkestan Independence Movement}, 1930s to 1940s, 106.
\textsuperscript{96} Klimes, \textit{Struggle by the Pen}, 176.
\textsuperscript{97} Saifuddin, \textit{Memoir of Saifuddin}, 261.
\end{flushleft}
Saifuddin recalled how he could not be by his mother’s side when she passed away in Khulja (Yining), for the provincial authorities refused to let him travel.  

Dynamics in the European theatre of the Second World War also saw the breakdown of this Soviet-Sheng alliance. As the Germans penetrated deep into Soviet territory, the governor miscalculated and believed that Moscow was on the brink of collapse. Fearing that Soviet collapse would put him at the mercy of the authorities in Chungking, he began to think about switching sides. The Governor started sending letters to Chiang Kai-shek, and attempted to portray himself as a pitiful Nationalist officer who had fallen prey to Soviet seduction and repression. Relations between the two parties broke down completely with the mysterious death of Army Commander Sheng Shih-chi, the brother of the governor. On the night of March 19, 1942, the corpse of Sheng Shih-chi was wheeled into the Urumchi military hospital. Hospital records indicated that the head of Sheng was bloodied beyond recognition. Upon a closer inspection, officials concluded that Sheng was shot with the barrel applied to the head; consequently, much of the skin on the face was “burned, with the bones of the skull fractured, and brain matter crushed by the gases from the shot.” Seizing on this incident, Sheng Shih-tsai penned a letter of protest to Stalin. The governor claimed that Chen Hsiu-ying (Sheng Shi-chi’s wife) was behind the killing after being seduced by Lieutenant Ratov, a Soviet military advisor:

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98 Saifuddin, Memoir of Saifuddin, 263.
99 After Nanking was occupied by the Japanese in 1937, Chungking became the seat of the Nationalist Government of the Republic of China until the end of the War in 1945.
100 “Excerpts from Operations Log of the Urumchi Military Hospital,” 1942, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive.
“Ratov sparked Chen’s jealousy by claiming that Sheng Shih-chi had found another woman (while on exchange) in Moscow. (Worsening relations between the two), Ratov achieved a physical bond with Chen, which continued for some time. (Emphasis added).”

The wording employed in this letter also indicates Sheng’s resolve to poison relations with Moscow. Instead of addressing Stalin as “Comrade” like before, Sheng referred to the leader as “Mr. Stalin.” And in a move not seen before in his communications to Moscow, Sheng affixed his official title as the “Governor of Sinkiang” at the end of the letter, as if to indicate an intention to re-establish his dominance over the province. What actually happened was quite the opposite. According to interviews conducted by Nationalist officials a few years later, the brother was accidentally shot by the Governor after a heated argument. There were lasting tensions between the two, because it was Sheng Shih-tsai who slept with his brother’s wife! Nevertheless, clinging to this narrative of having his personal honour insulted by the Soviets at the time, Sheng openly declared his subservience to the Nationalist Government of the Republic of China shortly afterwards.

For their part, Chungking saw the Soviet-Sheng rift as an opportunity to reassert Chinese sovereignty over the province. In a telegram to Chiang Kai-shek, Interior Minister Ho Ying-ching recognized that the government had no resources to send forces and seize the province, as most of its troops were tied down in the fight against Japan. The projection of power over the province, therefore, has to be executed gradually. The Minister therefore recommended capitalizing on Sheng Shih-tsai’s fears of being sidelined by the Soviets, and co-opt him for the time being. To prevent Sheng from vacillating, the Chinese secret police was to extend its network into the

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province, and the Foreign Ministry was to send a commissioner to Sinkiang to monitor the province’s relationship with the Soviets. Soviet Ambassador Petrov, in turn, tried to end the rapprochement between Sheng and Chiang by turning over internal documents that detailed Sheng’s earlier attempts to make Sinkiang a part of the Soviet Union. Working to co-opt Sheng without giving the impression that he was condoning the governor’s actions, Chiang agreed with Petrov that Sheng’s transgressions should be addressed. However, the Chinese leader also noted that the irritants would not have happened if the Soviets had directly conferred with Chungking. Therefore, Chiang Kai-shek insisted that the Soviets should refrain from dealing with the provincial government in the future.

To this end, Chiang called on the Soviets to renegotiate the agreements that they penned with Sheng in the past. Of particular focus was the Tushantze refinery; Chiang would not permit the Soviets to continue operations there if his government was not given a 51% share over the company. Foreign ministry officials also challenged a clause in the original agreement that compelled the provincial government to relinquish control of land “free of charge” when requested to do so by Moscow. They demanded that the scope of any Soviet economic foray into the province should be determined on an ad hoc basis. To allow the Soviets, or any other foreigners, to move around the province with impunity would be a grave violation of Chinese sovereignty over Sinkiang. The Chinese leadership also wanted to assert control over other Soviet assets in the province, such as the aircraft production plant in Urumchi. Occupied with pressing issues on the European front, Moscow decided to shut down its operations altogether. On August 2, 1943,

102 Central Committee of the Kuomintang, Chan-shi Wai-chiao 2, 438-439.
103 Central Committee of the Kuomintang, Chan-shi Wai-chiao 2, 436-437.
104 “Negotiations over the Tushantze Refinery” (government document, Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Chungking, 1943).
Nationalist officials noted that 80% of the aircraft production plant had disappeared. The plant had become a hollow shell, with most of the wiring and equipment spirited back across the border. Two weeks later, officials also noted that the machinery at the Tushantze refinery was also gone. Frustrated that they were left with no means to extract oil, officials suggested that the government should seek American investment instead. However, the officials concurred that they would rather have an inoperable refinery than have a perpetual Soviet presence in the provinces. Plans were also drawn up to solicit Washington and London support in establishing consulates in Urumchi, so that Soviet influence could be effectively checked.

Shutting down operations did not entail a Soviet withdrawal from the province. That same year, the Politburo issued a decree, specifically directing government agencies to foment opposition against the Chinese; agents are to “support the non-Chinese ethnic minority of Sinkiang (Uyghurs, Kazaks, Kirghiz, Mongols) in their struggle against the repressive colonialist policy of the Governor and the Sinkiang government.” Emphasis on the establishment of a provincial administration that is not Han Chinese was quite apparent: “a Sinkiang national political council shall be organized on the basis of appointment by election of its representatives in proportion to the size of the population of each ethnic group.” Measures should also be adopted to pre-empt any migration of people from other Chinese provinces to Sinkiang. To raise the national consciousness of the Turkic population in Sinkiang, “fictional and political literature in the languages of the peoples of Sinkiang” should be distributed, showcasing “ethnic development in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kirghizia (Soviet Turkestan)”. To bind the Turkic populations of the province closer with their counterparts in the Soviet Union, Moscow

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106 Central Committee of the Kuomintang, *Chan-shi Wai-chiao* 2, 455.
also permitted the “Kazakhs, Kirghiz, and Mongols” of Sinkiang to migrate freely across the border. The decree also instructed the NKVD and NKVT to use “existing agent networks to help organize ‘National Revival Groups’, which will carry out illegal activities (against Sheng),” and conduct clandestine trade. Responsibility for the execution of this plan was placed in the hands of Soviet Turkic leaders-Yusupov and Abdurakhmanov of Uzbek SSR, Skortsov and Undasynov of the Kazakh SSR, and Vagov and Kula\textit{t}ov of the Kirghiz SSR.\textsuperscript{107}

Conclusion

As one can see, the Soviets were keen on maintaining their economic and political influence over Sinkiang, resorting to every method possible. With the rupture of the Soviet-Sheng axis, Moscow decided to champion ethnic struggles in Sinkiang. As a consequence of the shifting allegiances of Sheng, Uyghur national consciousness would begin to flourish again. However, readers should notice that the Soviets refrained from treating “Uyghur” as an umbrella term to refer to the Turkic populations in the province. Perhaps Moscow did not want ethnic agitations to turn into a Pan-Turkic movement which would then complicate political dynamics in Soviet Turkestan. Likewise, the Soviets did not call for the secession of Sinkiang from the Republic of China; to do so would be geopolitically inconvenient and problematic, for the two countries were officially allies in the Second World War. Nevertheless, with the Soviet shift to engineering ethnic struggles in Sinkiang, the stage was set for the Uyghur Uprisings of 1944, the focus of the next chapter.

\textsuperscript{107} “Excerpt on Sinkiang from Minutes No. 40 of the VKP (B) CC Politburo Meetings,” May 4, 1943, History and Policy Program Digital Archive.
Chapter 3: The 1944 Uyghur Uprisings, in the context of Sino-Soviet Geopolitics at the end of the Second Sino-Japanese War

“Screw the communists” says the screwed Commander

The morning of November 6, 1944 lent itself to unusually warm interactions between the Soviet Consulate and the Sinkiang authorities. Commander Chu Shao-liang of the provincial army was woken up in the early hours by the Soviet Consul Evesoff, who enthusiastically knocked on his door. Evesoff was uncharacteristically happy; after expressing his confidence on Sino-Soviet friendship, the consul invited Chu to join him at an unofficial luncheon, ahead of the formal consular reception marking the 27th anniversary of the October Revolution. While slightly caught
off-balance by the consul’s demeanor, the commander was all too happy to oblige. At the luncheon, Chu downed lots of wine, as every Soviet consular official lined up to toast him. When he attended the formal consular function later that evening, Chu was plied with delicacies and another round of toasts again. With his body saturated with alcohol, the blissfully inebriated commander collapsed upon returning home. Passing out until the afternoon of the next day, Commander Chu rose to the worried face of his deputy, who informed him that Uyghur insurgents have launched an assault on Yining. Although a string of expletives tore from his mouth, Chu was the one who was screwed. Within a few months following the fall of Yining, the Uyghur insurgents chewed up Chu’s forces, and proceeded to project their power over the northern reaches of Sinkiang in the name of the East Turkestan Republic.108

Following the rupture of the strategic partnership between Governor Sheng and Stalin, Uyghur political consciousness found expression once again, as the Soviets turned to support native struggles for a polity separate from China. With primary documents from the Politburo, records from the Chinese Foreign Ministry, and recollections from Saifuddin, this chapter will outline how the East Turkestan Republic was propped up under the direct tutelage of Soviet military advisors. This armed and literal manifestation of Uyghur consciousness was short-lived, however, as the Soviets used the uprisings as leverage to wrest greater concessions from the Republic of China on the negotiating table. Once the question of Outer Mongolia and extraterritorial rights in Manchuria was resolved to their satisfaction (with the conclusion of the 1945 Sino-Soviet Friendship Treaty), the Soviets scaled back their support for the Uyghurs once again.

Economic and Political Preconditions Enabling Soviet Involvement in the 1944 Uyghur Uprising

Soviet involvement in the uprisings of 1944 was made possible by the crippling economic conditions of Sinkiang at the time. Following the rupture of ties between Governor Sheng and Moscow, inter-border trade came to a standstill. The termination of trade between Sinkiang and Soviet Kazakhstan, in turn, removed the only foreign market for the province’s goods. This had a devastating impact on the province’s cash flows, for 50% of its revenue was dependent on cross-border trade with the Soviets. Efforts to ameliorate drying cash flows came at the expense of the people as well. In an order to raise funds, the provincial government raised taxes exponentially. The per capita tax, previously kept at 317 yuan, was suddenly increased sevenfold to 2419 yuan in 1944.109 Burdened with prohibitive taxes, the average Uyghur was also slapped with decreasing purchasing power. In an ill-conceived move to deepen the pockets of its treasury, the provincial government decided to print more money. Printing more money, in turn, spurred inflation rates, making products more expensive. According to Saifuddin, 1944 prices were four times more than that of 1943, and rent spiralled out of control, amounting for half the salary of an average Uyghur. Removal of Soviet experts and machinery, such as the dismantlement of the aircraft factory covered in the last chapter, also brought manufacturing to a halt.

Discontent among the Uyghurs was further augmented as the provincial government failed to undertake meaningful political reforms. Although Sheng was removed from power in 1944, his successor, Wu Chung-hsin, preserved the traditional power structure in the province. Wu preferred to ingratiate himself with local powerbrokers, attempting to win them over with feasts. Feasting offensives, in fact, seems to be the only thing that the Governor was adept at doing, for a significant

number of diary entries involve him eating with dignitaries. For instance, on October 14, 1944, Wu treated a delegation of lamas to lunch, after they arrived at his office and proclaimed their support for his governorship. Likewise, on November 30, 1944, the Governor shared a meal with an hereditary prince, and took the opportunity to “enlighten” him on the “benevolent policies” of the Three Principles of the People. The Governor also explicitly remarked in his meeting with the prince that the Kuomintang’s policy was to “co-opt the local leaders,” who will then “enhance the welfare of the people.” Though the feasting activities may appear mundane, they do shed light on the Governor’s attitude towards the Uyghur populations in the province. Toasting Kazakh community leaders at a luncheon on December 2, 1944, the Governor stressed how the Kazakhs shared the same ethnic roots as the Han Chinese: “just compare [the colour] of our skin and our hair, how are we different?” This quotation suggests that the governor was not keen on allowing local intellectuals from serving within his government, for he sought to render nationality issues redundant by asserting that all ethnicities were Han Chinese.

Indeed, prior to his assumption to the governorship of Sinkiang, Wu had repeatedly characterized the Uyghurs as a zongzu (branch) of the Chinese nation, not a nation in its own right. In his remarks to the national legislature, Wu also argued against granting “minority requests” for government posts, because “their knowledge and skills are insufficient” for such activities. Wu’s chauvinistic attitude was quite prevalent in his diary as well; at one point, the governor made strong

110 “October 14, 1944” – Diary of Governor Wu Chung-hsin (diary, Academia Historica, 1944).
111 “November 30, 1944,” Diary of Wu Chung-hsin. Written by Dr. Sun Yat-sen, the Three Principles of the People serves as the fundamental, governing ideology in the Republic of China, containing passages on the realization of democracy (minchuan), the people’s livelihood (minsheng), and the inculcation of inter-ethnic harmony within the “Chinese nation” (“minzu”).
112 “December 2, 1944,” Diary of Wu Chung-hsin.
113 Klimes, Struggle by the Pen, 202.
representations against the return of certain *Hui* (Muslim) intellectuals, stating that their presence will “bring instability” to the province. Fully cognizant of Wu’s superiority complex, Uyghur members of the Kuomintang actually appealed to the Chinese government to rethink its Sinkiang policy. Mesud Sabri pointed out that the Chinese government’s *Hui* moniker was obsolete and offensive, in that it denied the national status of the Turkic peoples of Sinkiang: “is Hui supposed to be a name of a religion? If so it cannot be the name of a nation (*ulus*).”\(^{114}\) Establishing that the *Hui* designation was out-of-sync with the times, Sabri called on the Chinese authorities to recognize the indigenous populations of Sinkiang as Uyghur or Turkic. Failure to do so, the intellectual warned, would further stoke “bitterness and harsh feelings” among the Uyghurs of the province.

“*Bitterness and Harsh Feelings*” *in Action, with Soviets Supporting the Armed Faction: The 1944 Uyghur Uprisings*

Capitalizing on popular dissent stemming from the political and economic stagnation in Sinkiang, the Soviets began actively supporting an Uyghur insurrection against the provincial authorities. An inkling of upcoming troubles first surfaced on March 27, 1944, when the provincial authorities were chasing down armed insurgents in the Altai mountain range. As provincial forces cornered the rebels along the Sino-Mongolian border, Soviet planes suddenly appeared on the horizon, and began to bomb the Chinese positions. With Chinese troops pinned down, the rebel fighters were able to break out and disperse into the Gobi Desert.\(^{115}\) When Chinese authorities protested against Soviet interference, redress from Moscow was not forthcoming. Officials declined to comment, and decided to hit back through their media outlets. On April 3, 1944, TASS

\(^{114}\) Klimes, *Struggle by the Pen*, 200.
\(^{115}\) “March 27, 1944,” Diary of Wu Chung-hsin.
(the Soviet News Agency), released a statement, pinning the responsibility for the skirmish on the Chinese: “Chinese forces illegally crossed the border into the Mongolian People’s Republic. The Soviet Union, bound by the 1936 Sino-Mongolian Mutual Assistance Treaty, had no choice but to defend Mongolian sovereignty.”

Revolutionary cells, like the “National Revival Groups,” which the NKVD was instructed to form, also began to emerge. In his memoirs, Saifuddin recalled that he joined a “National Liberation Organization” under the leadership of Abdul Kerim Abasov in late 1943. To his knowledge, other equivalents to the “National Liberation Organization” also sprung up in other parts of the province at the time. There was a “Marxist Literature Group” in Urumchi, a “Youth Torches Union” based in Aksu, and a “National Liberation Committee” operating out of Sharasum. Abasov would eventually incorporate all of these other groups within his “National Liberation Organization” in the months leading up to the uprisings in November 1944.

The platform of this “National Liberation Organization” mirrored that of the directive outlined in the minutes of a Politburo meeting in May 4, 1943. Saifuddin outlined that the Organization operated on three basic principles. The Organization was tasked to disseminate propaganda among the masses, organize armed uprisings from Yining, with the goal of overthrowing the “Kuomintang reactionaries,” and enter into a unified front with other insurgent groups, to establish a free and democratic Sinkiang.” Soviet leaders likewise instructed agents to “print and distribute fictional and political leaflets” within Sinkiang, “support the non-Chinese ethnic minorities in their struggle against the repressive, colonialist policy of the Sinkiang government,” and work towards “the election of a Sinkiang government in proportion to the ethnic

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117 Saifuddin, Memoir of Saifuddin, 293.
distribution of the province.” The Politburo directive also explicitly called for the establishment of “ethnic military units” within these revolutionary cells; Uzbek and Kazakh leaders, such as Yusupov, Abdurakhamov, Skvortsov, and Undasynov, were instructed to train Uyghur military and political cadres, and “furnish them with the necessary weapons”. To maintain an effective channel of communication between the Soviet authorities and the armed insurgents, the directive also relaxed border controls, allowing the ethnic minorities of Sinkiang to freely migrate in and out of the country. Border guards were specifically ordered to “grant asylum to people being persecuted by the Sinkiang government for participation in the struggle against ethnic oppression, and provide necessary assistance to them on Soviet territory.”

Indeed, Saifuddin recalled how Abasov secretly crossed into the Soviet Union a month before active hostilities erupted in Yining, to shelter himself from the “poisoned political atmosphere” in the province. Though the details of this trip remain unknown, it was probably to secure Soviet military support, for armaments started flowing to Abasov’s rebels after the trip. At the end of October 1944, Abasov made a second trip to across the border, where he got more arms to stage an uprising. The manner in which Saifuddin became a member of the “National Liberation Organization” is also telling of the degree to which the Soviets involved themselves in the uprising. Saifuddin was approached by Abasov on the recommendations of Dubashin, a Soviet consular official.

With Soviet assistance, the Uyghurs launched military operations against Chinese authorities. On October 5, 1944, insurgents emerged from their base in Ulastai, and launched an

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118 “Excerpt on Sinkiang from Minutes No. 40 of the VKP (B) CC Politburo Meetings,” May 4, 1943, History and Policy Program Digital Archive.
119 Saifuddin, Memoir of Saifuddin, 295.
offensive in Nilka. Beleaguered by the sudden attack, the Chinese forces were quickly entrapped at the police headquarters in the city. Unable to radio in reinforcements, the 140 Chinese soldiers surrendered two days later. From Nilka, the insurgents regrouped and joined up with Abasov, who ordered an assault on Yining on November 7, 1944.\footnote{Saifuddin, \textit{Memoir of Saifuddin}, 301.} After a few days of heavy fighting, the Uyghur rebels were able to force the Chinese garrison to retreat to an airfield on the outskirts of the city. To ensure Abasov’s victory, Soviet troops directly participated in the battle. Under the command of a Soviet Kazakh general, 3,000 Kazakh and Kyrgyz men crossed the border and joined in the fight.\footnote{Wang, \textit{Under the Soviet Shadow}, 128.} With the city cleared of Chinese troops, the Uyghur separatists declared the formation of an East Turkestan Republic on November 12, 1944; as Abasov’s protégé, Saifuddin was subsequently named as the education minister for this breakaway polity. However, the East Turkestan Republic was not led by Abasov – in order to win widespread support across the province, a Muslim cleric by the name of Elihan Tore was selected by the rebels to head the new polity.

Following the proclamation of the East Turkestan Republic, Abasov’s troops branched out into a three-pronged pincer movement. The first battalion was tasked with capturing Tarbagatai, whilst the second battalion was ordered to prevent enemy troops from escaping the border region of Bortala to regroup with other Chinese divisions in the south of the province. For its part, the last battalion was to link up with rebels based in Sharasume, march towards Urumchi, and test Chinese positions in Tashkurgan. The Soviets participated in the execution of this plan as well; in a report to Stalin in April 1945, NKVD chief Beria outlined his recommendations for defence commissar Bulganin, who was to “allocate rifles, mortars, and ammunition” for the 15,000 strong detachment
of rebels in Sinkiang. Bulganin was also instructed to demobilize 500 officers and 2,000 Central Asian troops of the Red Army, and use them to support rebel formations “under disguise as Sinkiang inhabitants.” To challenge Chinese air superiority over Sinkiang, the defence commissar was also advised to retrofit 6 Polikarpov I-16 fighters and 3 SB bombers, and put them at the rebels’ disposal.\textsuperscript{122} Three months later, Major General Yegnarov informed Moscow that he was forming “five detachments with a total strength of 150 men,” who would be responsible for supporting the rebels in their drive to Manas. The additional injection of Soviet manpower had its intended effect; in August 1945, rebel troops encamped on the left bank of Manas, and put themselves within striking range for the provincial capital.\textsuperscript{123} For their part, the Chinese noted that the rebel assault on Manas was buttressed by twenty Soviet fighter planes, which strafed their positions with eight bombs.\textsuperscript{124}

\textit{The 1944 Uprisings as a Geopolitical Gamble: Moscow, Chungking, and the Postwar Order in the Far East}

With the knowledge of Moscow’s extensive participation in the 1944 Uyghur uprisings, the question to ask is: why were the Soviets so eager to gain a foothold over the province during this period of time? Simply put, the Uyghur episode factored strongly in Moscow’s geopolitical gambles, as Stalin used the threat of a breakaway polity to compel the Chinese to yield significant concessions in the Far East in 1945; the Soviets’ intention of using the events in Sinkiang as leverage was highlighted by the fact that they issued orders asking the ETR to hold their fire in

\textsuperscript{122} “Report from L. Beria and A. Vyshinsky to Comrade I. V. Stalin,” April 29, 1945, \textit{History and Policy Program Digital Archive}.


\textsuperscript{124} 13x, “Sinkiang Yining Incident (One)” (government document, Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Chungking, 1945).
June 1945, just as Chinese Premier Soong Tzu-ven arrived in Moscow for negotiations.\textsuperscript{125} This section will outline the main concessions that the Soviets were able to wrest from the Chinese: the acceptance of a new Sino-Mongolian border, the recognition of Outer Mongolia (Mongolian People’s Republic), and the restoration of Tsarist-era extraterritorial privileges in Manchuria.

\textit{a. The Sino-Mongolian Border, and the Separate Status of Outer Mongolia (Mongolian People’s Republic)}

Wiring a telegram to Washington on January 11, 1945, Horace H. Smith, the Second Secretary of the US Embassy in the Soviet Union, noticed a peculiar map of Outer Mongolia that he happened to chance upon at the Soviet consulate in Urumchi. He noticed that the boundary between Outer Mongolia and Sinkiang, as printed on all Chinese maps at the time, was carelessly erased. In place of the traditional boundary line, a new border was inked in, effectively transferring over 80,000 square kilometres of Sinkiang territory to the Mongolians.\textsuperscript{126} A map produced by the cartographic division of the Chinese Internal Ministry also noted the discrepancy between the traditional borderline and the new Sino-Mongolian boundary imposed by Moscow.\textsuperscript{127} The imposition of this new border by Moscow occurred shortly after the Uyghur rebels were able to project their power over the norther frontiers of Sinkiang, which means that the Chinese were not in a position to challenge it. When Chinese Premier Soong Tsu-ven pressed the issue with Stalin

\textsuperscript{125} Dzhamil Gasanly, \textit{Sin’tszian v orbite sovetskoi politiki: Stalin i Musul’manskoe dvizhenie v Vostochnom Turkestane (Sinkiang in the Orbit of Soviet Politics: Stalin and Muslim Divisions in East Turkestan)} (Moscow: Science Publishing House, 2015), 177.
\textsuperscript{126} “Memorandum by Horace H. Smith,” January 11, 1945, Office of the Historian, U.S. State Department.
\textsuperscript{127} “A Comparative Map of the Outer Mongolian Border delineated by the Republic of China and the boundary drawn by the Geodesic and Cartographic Bureau of the Council of People’s Commissars, USSR” (map, Cartographic Division of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Republic of China, 1945).
during the talks for a new Sino-Soviet Treaty in July 1945, the Soviet leader flatly refused. Soong suggested that the Soviets acknowledge the border drawn by cartographer Ting Wen-chiang in 1935, whilst his counterpart insisted that all sections of the Sino-Mongolian border have always remained at its original orientation. To break the impasse, the premier and the Soviet leader eventually decided to insert a more ambiguous clause which committed both sides to “respect the traditional boundaries” between China and Outer Mongolia.\textsuperscript{128}

The question to ask is: why were the Soviets so keen on seizing considerable chunks of Sinkiang territory on behalf of Outer Mongolia? The move was probably executed to assuage Outer Mongolian irredentism at the time. Near the conclusion of the Sino-Japanese War, Marshal Choibalsan actively sought to expand the reach of the Mongolian People’s Republic to areas outside the Khalkha. Of particular interest to Choibalsan was the Altai region of Sinkiang, which was a part of Outer Mongolia under the Manchu dynasty. Ulan Bator was probably annoyed with Moscow’s decision to admit Tannu Tuva to the Soviet Union in late 1944 as well, for it has also regarded that tract of land as Mongolian territory. The geographical area of Tannu Tuva, 100,000 square kilometres, roughly corresponds with the 80,000 square kilometres of Sinkiang territory which was turned over to the Outer Mongolian authorities. Compensating a country for their loss of land upon Soviet annexation with the territory of another country is not something novel in the execution of Soviet foreign policy. Around the same time, the Soviets gave Poland large swathes of German territory in exchange for the latter’s eastern provinces, which joined Soviet Byelorussia and Ukraine in 1941.

\textsuperscript{128} Central Committee of the Kuomintang, \textit{Chan-shi Wai-chiao} 2, 643, 650.
Not only were the Soviets anxious to re-draw the Sino-Mongolian border, they were insistent on compelling the Chinese to acknowledge the Mongolian People’s Republic (MPR/Outer Mongolia) as an independent state. Though Outer Mongolia had already existed as a separate polity for twenty years at 1945, most of the international community still officially recognized Chinese suzerainty over it. Even the Soviet Union was technically bound to acknowledge the pre-eminent position of the Chinese state over Outer Mongolia. According to the 1924 Sino-Soviet Treaty, Moscow explicitly pledged not to challenge the Republic of China’s claims over that territory. Stalin, however, was determined to overturn the status quo; in his representations to the Chinese premier Soong Tsu-ven, the Soviet leader wanted Outer Mongolia to officially separate from China, so that Moscow could effectively use it as a buffer state against a resurgent Japan in the future.  

Soong attempted to temper Stalin’s demands, by proposing to re-constitute Outer Mongolia as an “autonomous Chinese dominion,” with full rights to enter into economic and military alliances with other nations. The adoption of this formula would have allowed the Soviets to station troops in Outer Mongolia, whilst allowing the Chinese to maintain a nominal claims over the territory. Upon hearing Soong’s counteroffer, Stalin suspended the talks, and declared that he would not continue negotiations with Soong unless the Chinese adopted the Soviet position.

Fearing that the Soviets would capitalize on the lapse of negotiations to project a greater influence over the rebels in Sinkiang, the Chinese relented, and agreed to recognize the independence of Outer Mongolia. The degree to which the issues of Sinkiang and Outer

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129 Central Committee of the Kuomintang, *Chan-shi Wai-chiao* 2, 578.
130 Central Committee of the Kuomintang, *Chan-shi Wai-chiao* 2, 598.
131 In the middle of negotiations, Soong Tsu-ven had also tried to solicit the Americans to intervene on their behalf with respect to Outer Mongolia, but the latter refused to do so. In his reply to the
Mongolia were linked is quite evident, as the Soong immediately called on the Soviets to stop their activities in the province after conceding on the status of Outer Mongolia. Soong however, broached the topic in quite a roundabout way; he first pointed to the fact that there were rebels in the province, armed with the likes of weapons that the Chinese troops had “never encountered before.” Stalin attempted to deflect the issue, by suggesting that the weapons could have been furnished by British India; the Chinese premier immediately countered this characterization by asserting that Chinese forces have already conducted thorough investigations, and concluded that the weapons were not of British origin. Grasping this point, Soong then requested Moscow to adopt measures to prevent any potential flow of arms from the Soviet side. Stalin replied that he was more than willing to do his part to stop arms trafficking, for “Sinkiang is a Chinese province.”

Perhaps Soong did not want to draw the ire of the Stalin again, and have the Soviet negotiators walk out on him again! With the concession on Outer Mongolia, the Chinese premier was also able to obtain a commitment from the Soviets not to support the Chinese communists. Subsequent events would demonstrate that Moscow had always planned on using the uprisings in Sinkiang as a bargaining chip for Chinese recognition of Outer Mongolia. Moscow only permitted White Russians to return from Sinkiang to Soviet Central Asia on January 20, 1946, after the Chinese followed through with Outer Mongolian independence on January 6, 1946. The Chinese were anxious to see the White Russians removed from the province, as they were afraid that they would link up with the Uyghur fighters in the future.

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Chinese, President Truman flatly said that while “it certainly wasn’t in the United States’ view to have the Chinese make concessions which transcend the status quo,” it was ultimately up to the Chinese to counter the Soviets themselves, “if they didn’t like the way things are going, they should go back to the negotiating table with Stalin.”

132 Central Committee of the Kuomintang, *Chan-shi Wai-chiao* 2, 616.
133 Gasanly, *Sinkiang in the Orbit of Soviet Politics*, 223.
b. Restoration of Tsarist-era Privileges in Manchuria.

Moscow may have also decided to intervene in favour of the Uyghur rebels in order to pressure the Chinese to restore Tsarist-era privileges in Manchuria. At the turn of the twentieth century, the Russian Empire managed to wrest considerable concessions from Peking. The Conventions of 1898 allowed the Russian navy to administer the warm water harbours of Dairen (Dalny) and Port Arthur. Under this agreement, the Russians was also granted expansive tracts of Manchurian territory, so that they could connect the two ports to Russia with a railway. Receiving the Chinese premier on July 2, 1945, Stalin insisted that the postwar relations between the Soviet Union and the Republic of China should be based on the spirit of the 1898 Conventions, because the resumption of Russian control over the ports would “enable the Russians to effectively assist in the defence of China, should it come under the attack of Japan”\(^\text{134}\) again. As the Soviet designs over Manchuria have already received the tacit sanction of the British and the Americans at Yalta, the Chinese negotiators had no choice but to relent again.

Although the Chinese had to accept the resumption of Russian extraterritorial privileges in principle, they were able to water down some of Moscow’s demands. After several rounds of negotiations, the Chinese were able to limit Soviet influence in Dairen to specific port facilities, and allow a Chinese municipal government in function in tandem with a Soviet naval presence at Port Arthur for 30 years. Chinese delegates were able to slightly curb the scope of the Kremlin’s influence over the South Manchurian Railway by reducing the term of Soviet control to 30 years as well; the Soviets also agreed to nominally vest the control of the railway company in the hands

\(^\text{134}\) Central Committee of the Kuomintang, *Chan-shi Wai-chiao* 2, 580.
Should the original plans have been executed, Moscow would have been able to use a corporate proxy to control the entire city of Dairen, place Port Arthur under direct Soviet naval control, and administer the South Manchurian Railway for 40 to 45 years. The ability of Chinese negotiators to roll back the Soviets’ extraterritorial demands in Manchuria was also contingent on the settlement of the Outer Mongolian dispute, for these compromises were reached only after the Republic of China resolved to recognize the MPR as a separate state.

**Conclusion of the Sino-Soviet Treaty in 1945: Contraction of the Uyghur Uprising**

With the conclusion of the Sino-Soviet Treaty, the end of 1945 saw a contraction of Soviet support for the Uyghur uprising. After the Chinese concessions on Outer Mongolia and Manchuria were codified into the Treaty, the Soviets began scaling back their support for the East Turkestan Republic. However, this did not lead to an automatic ceasefire, for some divisions within the ETR insisted on fighting. Even on the day the treaty was signed, Uyghurs troops drove south and cut the road linking Urumchi and Paicheng. Exasperated, the Politburo issued a directive a few weeks later, instructing the rebels to hold fire so that a peaceful resolution could be achieved. Two days later, the Soviet consul in Urumchi informed Chang Chih-chung on September 17, 1945 that he was “approached by Yining representatives, who wanted him to act as a mediator for a

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135 Central Committee of the Kuomintang, *Chan-shi Wai-chiao* 2, 632, 638.
136 Chinese negotiators were also able get the Soviets to change the wording used to characterize these extraterritorial privileges, from “Concession” to “Soviet administration under Chinese request.” The adoption of the latter term would enable the Chinese to maintain a veneer of sovereignty over the areas. See *Chan-shi Wai-chiao* 2, 632.
137 Central Committee of the Kuomintang, *Chan-shi Wai-chiao* 2, 584.
peaceful resolution of the crisis.” The Soviet consul also stated that the Uyghur leaders have also made declarations that they “did not want to separate from China.” From the insubordination displayed by some ETR factions, the idea that leaders in Yining did not want to separate from China was definitely imposed by the Soviet consul; in fact, Elihan Tore still appealed to Stalin for the resumption of hostilities as late as October 1945. Accounts provided by Saifuddin also illustrate that Moscow exerted a lot of pressure in getting the ETR to wind down their attacks on Chinese troops. According to Saifuddin, he was in the process of organizing “Marxist study groups” at the time when a Soviet advisor intervened and shut it down inexplicably. When Saifuddin attempted to defy the intervention by concealing Marxist study groups within “philosophical associations,” the Soviet advisor came again and ordered them to be dissolved. Unfazed, Saifuddin and Abasov attempted to disseminate Marxist ideas for a third time by forming a “Philosophic Tutelage Committee.” When the Soviets got wind of this, they came back and forcibly stopped their activities yet again, insisting that “now is not the right time.”

The reluctance of the Yining leaders to accept the subordination of their breakaway polity under China was further demonstrated when they arrived in Urumchi for peace talks on October 13, 1945. Presenting themselves as delegates acting in the name of the “East Turkestan Republic,” they drew the ire of Liu Tze-jung and Chang Chih-chung, who immediately protested

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140 43x, “Sinkiang Yining Incident (One)” (government document, Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Chungking, 1945).
141 General Chang Chih-chung was appointed as the Northwestern Military-Administrative Intendant by Chiang Kai-shek at this time to handle the Uyghur uprising. After a peace deal was reached between the Chinese authorities and Yining, Chang would replace Wu Chung-hsin as Sinkiang Governor.
142 Gasanly, Sinkiang in the Orbit of Soviet Politics, 213.
143 Saifuddin, Memoir of Saifuddin, 332-4.
144 20a, “Sinkiang Yining Incident (Two)” (government document, Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Chungking, 1945).
to the Soviet consulate. After more admonishments from the Soviets, the Uyghur representatives cancelled their official title, and agreed to participate as “leaders from the Three Districts.”

Nevertheless, representatives from Yining managed to exact quite a considerable amount of political concessions from the provincial authorities. Over the course of talks, the ETR leaders were able to get Chang Chi-chung to recognize Uyghur as a language with the same status as Mandarin. The Military-Administrative Intendant also promised to overhaul the educational system, so that Uyghur would be the primary language for instruction in elementary and secondary schools. With the conclusion of talks, the ETR leaders were able to participate directly in the provincial government as cabinet ministers. Saifuddin became the new educational minister in the coalition government, whilst Abasov became the Deputy Secretary General in June 1946.

The Soviets, however, were not planning on completely withdrawing from the province altogether. In a telegram to Chungking on September 29, 1945, Liu noted that the provincial troops have routed a rebel advance on Tashkurgan, and captured 235 “bandits.” Examining the belongings of these “bandits,” Chinese troops uncovered battle maps of Soviet origin. Why did the Soviets want to retain a degree of influence within the province? Chinese sources suggest that Moscow calculated to maintain the status quo in the province, so that it could capitalize on the natural resource areas which had fallen outside of Urumchi’s control. In an internally circulating

145 Liu Tze-jung, Extraordinary Resident of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Sinkiang, responsible for conducting negotiations with the Yining rebels.
146 Wang, Under the Soviet Shadow, 239.
147 71a, “Sinkiang Yining Incident (One)” (government document, Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Chungking, 1945).
148 Another possible interpretation of the Tashkurgan offensive: The battle plans were drawn up by the rebels and the Soviets long before the Sino-Soviet Treaty was inked, but the rebels still decided to execute it against Moscow’s wishes. The viability of this interpretation can be demonstrated by the fact that the Chinese did not note the participation of Soviet forces in this offensive.
memo, Liu Tze-jung noted that gold ores in Sharasume, wolfram in Wusu, and oil reserves in Koktagay. Osman Batur, an ETR leader who later defected to the provincial authorities, recalled observing Soviets transporting truckloads of gold ore out of Sharasume in 1946. In other words, Soviet mediation mostly worked to maintain a separate status for the “Three Districts,” whilst paying lip-service to Chinese sovereignty over all of Sinkiang. The Soviet preference for maintaining the status quo can be observed in the way they addressed the question of East Turkestan military units. After floating an unrealistic proposal which would allow the rebels to maintain a presence in areas of the province not under their control, they were able to compel the Chinese to make counteroffers which effectively preserved the frontline. Apart from a few cosmetic changes, the 15,000-strong rebel force were allowed to retain their positions; “rebel troops should be re-designated as units of the Chinese Army. As part of the Chinese Army they would be responsible for the safety of their communities.”

With the ability to bend both the Uyghurs and the Chinese to its will, Moscow projected its influence over the peace talks every step of the way. General Soong Hsi-lien recalled how the Soviet consul Evesoff was able to lodge an interjection right when a peace deal was about to be inked. As delegates were settling in for lunch just before the signing ceremony, the Soviet consul suddenly demanded to review each article, and crossed out the ones he did not like. Amongst the articles which were targeted was the provision that the “election of county magistrates should be approved by the provincial government with the permission of the central government.” Upon seeing this article, the Soviet consul crossed out “with the permission of the central government” as if suggesting that the Chinese government should have no say over its province. Chang would

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149 80a, “Sinkiang Yining Incident (Two)” (government document, Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Chungking, 1945).
eventually decide to overlook Yevseyev’s pedantry and accept the changes, reasoning that “members of the provincial government were already selected with the permission of the central government.”\(^{150}\) Moscow, however, was careful not to disrupt the status quo; with the peace deal concluded, Elihan Tore was removed from the province, and placed under house arrest in the Soviet Union.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, the rupture of ties between Sheng and Soviets led the latter to actively support the Uyghurs against the Chinese state. With backing from Moscow, Uyghur political consciousness expressed itself in the most direct and violent of ways, in the name of the East Turkestan Republic with the 1944 uprisings. This East Turkestan Republic, however, was short-lived, as Moscow decided to cancel the project after obtaining Chinese concessions on the status of Outer Mongolia and the restoration of Tsarist-era extraterritoriality over Manchuria. By separating resource-rich areas from Chinese control, the uprising inadvertently served Soviet economic interests as well.

**Chapter 4: Conclusion - Facing the Red Sun**

Re-incorporating the Three Districts under Chinese sovereignty ultimately proved to be a cosmetic exercise. Even with the conclusion of a peace agreement, the Uyghur insurgents launched a covert propaganda offensive over the entire province, seeking to whittle away any remnants of Chinese authority in Sinkiang. Saifuddin recalled how he decided to use his official capacity as the province’s educational minister to shelter those making leaflets: “I decided to host a makeshift

printing operation at my house, for Chinese intelligence are unlikely to barge in, lest they want to create the impression of breaking the peace agreement.” The educational minister also devised a novel way of distributing leaflets through children, to escape the prying eyes of Urumchi. Children would masquerade as “beggars” descending upon Saifuddin’s house for money. Once they entered the house, they would stuff the pamphlets in their pants before they were “shooed” away.151 Nevertheless, the uncharacteristic numbers of children entering and exiting Saifuddin’s house eventually drew the suspicions of Chinese officials, who sought to investigate “by paying friendly visits”; the educational minister promptly relocated the printing operation to Abasov’s residence.

The propaganda offensive was buttressed by the revival of Marxist political organs, which were previously terminated by the Soviets. Following the forced dissolution of the “Philosophic Tutelage Committee” by Moscow, Saifuddin and his protégés quietly re-constituted the organization as the “People’s Revolutionary Party” in December 1945. With the conclusion of the peace agreement a few months later, Saifuddin kept the Party running under the auspices of a “Friendship Association” promoting closer cultural and economic links between China and the Soviet Union.152

Fearing that Moscow would render their political efforts stillborn again, Uyghur leaders sought survival by grafting themselves to the Chinese communist movement. According to Saifuddin, initial contact was made with the Chinese communists at Nanking in November 1946. As Abasov attended National Assembly proceedings at the Chinese capital, he secretly held meetings with Chinese communist representatives. Over the course of these meetings, the Uyghur leader formally requested the acceptance of the “People’s Revolutionaries” as an “affiliate” of the

151 Saifuddin, Memoir of Saifuddin, 376.
152 Saifuddin, Memoir of Saifuddin, 378.
Chinese Communist Party. Seeking to expand their influence into Sinkiang, Yenan accepted Abasov’s proposals; issuing a reply to Abasov a month later, Chou En-lai and Liu Shao-chi declared that they were more than happy to extend Party membership to the leaders of the East Turkestan Republic; to maintain open communications between the Yenan and the Uyghur insurgents, a radio crew was also instructed to travel with Abasov back to Sinkiang.¹⁵³

The intertwined fate of the Uyghur insurgents and the Chinese communists was made all the more binding as the coalition government in Sinkiang broke down in 1947. What limited collaboration the Uyghur insurgents might have had with the Nationalist Chinese authorities dissipated over differences on how to fill the vacant governorship. Chang Chih-chung stepped down from his post as Governor of Sinkiang in May 1947, as Nanking was anxious for him to resume his previous role and re-start talks with the Chinese communists (by this time, the country was back in the throes of the Civil War, and Nationalist troops were being systematically wiped out by the communists in Manchuria). Members of the cabinet from the Three Districts demanded to oversee the selection of the new governor, whilst the Nationalist Chinese insisted on appointing Masud Sabri to the role. Upon hearing that Sabri was going to assume the governorship, the insurgents immediately sought to strip his power. Commandeering a 62-28 majority in the Provincial Assembly, the insurgents managed to pass a motion of no-confidence against the incoming Governor on June 4, 1947.¹⁵⁴ When the Nationalists decided to ignore this motion, the insurgents withdrew their recognition of Urumchi’s authority, and headed back to Khuldja a month later. The question to ask is: why were the ETR leaders so apprehensive of Sabri? Perhaps the

¹⁵³ Saifuddin, Memoir of Saifuddin, 383.
insurgents’ insecurity stems from the fact that Sabri, as an Uyghur member of the Kuomintang, could have presented an alternative discourse that would seriously whittle their influence over the province. Having a non-Uyghur at the helm would be politically expedient for these rebels too, as they could continue to prop up a clear-cut narrative of Chinese oppression over the province. To this effect, the insurgents actively petitioned Chang Chih-chung to resume his post as Sinkiang’s governor. Noticing their ploy, Chang urged the insurgents to work with the new governor: “the appointment of Sabri exceeds the concessions that we have made in the peace deal of 1946, and speaks to our commitment on the provision of local autonomy; your opposition [to the appointment of Sabri just because of political differences] only demonstrates that your calls for ‘democracy’ and ‘ethnic equality’ are duplicitous and false.”

Relations between the two parties were also poisoned by the fact that the Nationalist Chinese accepted the defection of Osman Batur, the Kazakh administrator of Sharasume. Batur initially allied his forces with the East Turkestan Republic during the uprisings of 1944, and helped the rebels project control over the Altai Mountains. Trust between the two parties soon broke down, however, as Batur believed that the ETR was scheming to sideline him; his suspicions were raised as the leadership in Khuldja sent spies to monitor his every move. To forestall a coup against him, Batur sent emissaries to Governor Chang in August 1945 to declare his intent on defecting, and appealed for government assistance. Besides asking for a cache of a thousand rifles and a radio, the Kazakh leader also invited government troops to link up with his forces in the Altai.

After news of his defection became known to the public, the enraged insurgents sent Delihan to

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155 105x, “Sinkiang Yining Incident (Four)” (government document, Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Chungking, 1945).
156 Soong, Ying-chuan Chiang-chun: Soong Hsi-lien Tzu-shu (Memoirs of General Soong Hsi-lien), 335.
flush Batur out of the Altai. On October 22, 1947, Urumchi received intelligence that Uyghur insurgents have sent 80 truckloads of troops to seize control of Sharasume.\textsuperscript{157} With his ejection from Sharasume, Batur led his forces south and played an important role in thwarting an Outer Mongolian attempt to wrest Mount Baytag away from the Nationalist Chinese.\textsuperscript{158}

With a complete rupture of relations between the Three Districts and the government of the Republic of China, leaders of the rebellion were more than happy to fully integrate themselves with the Chinese communist movement. At the end August of 1949, Abasov accepted an invitation from Mao Tse-tung to participate in his constituent assembly – the “People’s Political Consultative Conference.” Abasov’s trip to Peking, however, was to end in tragedy; his plane went down over Lake Baikal and slammed into a mountain. With the leader of the ETR incapacitated, Saifuddin was chosen to be sent in Abasov’s place. A month later, the Uyghur leader was to stand on top of the Tien-an-men Gate behind Mao, who proceeded to proclaim Communist supremacy over mainland China.

In sum, the contours of Uyghur political consciousness were shaped by the intersection of Soviet and Chinese geopolitics over the first half of the twentieth century. A separate Uyghur political identity was first inculcated as the Soviets sought to project power over Central Asia through the co-optation of nationalist movements in the 1920s. The transmission of this separate

\textsuperscript{157} 21a, “Sinkiang Yining Incident (Three)” (government document, Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Chungking, 1945).

\textsuperscript{158} The Mount Baytag Incident occurred almost simultaneously with the ejection of Osman Batur from Sharasume. Therefore, the following conjectures can be made: 1) The Outer Mongolians were seeking to expand their territory amidst the turmoil in Sinkiang, or 2) The Outer Mongolians were seeking to prevent Osman Batur’s forces from linking up with Nationalist Chinese forces with a border skirmish, in line with Soviet geopolitical interests. However, a lack of sources makes it impossible to definitively make either of those claims. More information about the skirmish itself can be found in Liu, \textit{The Truth Behind the Unrest in Sinkiang}, 146-159.
Uyghur identity back to Sinkiang was initially restrained as Moscow sought to prop up Sheng Shih-tsai’s regime in return for extensive mining rights during the 1930s. Soviet restraint, however, was rolled back following Sheng’s defection to the Nationalists in 1941. As the governor arbitrarily confiscated its economic holdings in the province, Moscow threw its support behind Uyghur revolutionaries, who severely crippled Chinese sovereignty over the province with their uprisings in 1944. The Soviets then capitalized on the unrest to compel the Republic of China to accept its post-war designs over Outer Mongolia and Manchuria. With the Nationalist’s grudging acceptance of its terms, the Soviets scaled back its support for the Uyghur insurgents. Faced with fading Soviet support, the Uyghur insurgents ultimately grafted their movement with that of communist China.
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