

Yearning for a Republic Erased from the Map

By Nabijan Tursun

November 12, 2010, marked the 66th anniversary of one of the greatest events in twentieth century Uyghur history, the establishment of the Eastern Turkistan Republic (ETR). Members of the Uyghur diaspora in the United States, Canada, Europe, Turkey, and Central Asia commemorated this short-lived historic republic and celebrated this day as the independence day of the Uyghur people.

However, the Chinese government still considers this historic republic part of the “three-district revolution” and “one of the components of the Chinese people's democratic revolutionary movement.”

The Uyghur nation is geographically and culturally part of Central Asia, but is currently within the political boundaries of the People’s Republic of China. The Uyghur nation faced opportunities to establish a sovereign homeland in the 19th century and in the 1930s and 1940s. However, efforts to establish an independent state failed to have a lasting effect, and today the Uyghurs’ very existence as a distinct ethnic group remains in question.

The political fate of the Uyghurs

In the second half of the 19th century, the political fate of the Uyghur nation was of the interest to the Great Powers.

The fate of the last independent state of the Uyghurs, the East Turkistan Republic (1944-1949), was intimately related to decisions at the Yalta Conference and developments during the early stages of the Cold War.

The political fate of this Central Asian people has been an element in the foreign policy of the former Soviet Union, the United States, Great Britain and China for many years, though this historic reality has likely been forgotten by contemporary politicians.

The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region

Uyghurs mainly reside in what the Chinese government calls the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, where they number approximately 9.6 million based on the Chinese census in 2006, and 15-20 million according to Uyghur sources.

Uyghurs comprise 45% of the population based on official Chinese statistics. However, about 60 years ago, in 1949, Uyghurs constituted close to 80% of the population, and Han Chinese constituted a mere 5%. Uyghurs are becoming a minority in their own historic land.

Before the republic

Throughout history, Uyghurs established their own states.

Only in the second half of the 18th century was the land was colonized by Qing dynasty forces from China. However, in the subsequent hundred years, the land witnessed many uprisings by native populations against foreign rule, and in the middle of the 19th century, Uyghurs established an independent state, Kashgaria, under the leadership of Yaqub Beg. The new ruler established diplomatic relations with the Ottoman, British and Russian Empires. The struggle between the Russian and British Empires for influence in the region formed part of the Great Game.

The Qing dynasty re-conquered the land in 1878, and incorporated it into China under the name of Xinjiang province in 1884. After the collapse of the Qing in 1911, the region was ruled by Chinese warlords independent from the Chinese central government. During the years between 1931 and 1934, there were independent movements against the rule of the warlords all across the region.

A first republic

On November 12, 1933, the people of the region established the first Republic of East Turkistan with its capital as Kashgar. The new republic had all the trappings of a modern state, such as a constitution, flag, and government institutions, and its institutions were influenced by those of Mustafa Kamal Ataturk's Turkey.

The new republic tried to establish diplomatic relations with a range of countries such as the Soviet Union, Turkey, Great Britain, Japan, and Afghanistan, and obtain assistance from them.

However, the Soviet Union was deeply suspicious about this new republic and suspected that it could fall under the political, economic, military and cultural influence of Great Britain, Turkey, and Japan, thereby threatening the security of its Central Asian territories.

Therefore, the Soviet Union decided to destroy the republic using Hui Muslim troops and turn this territory into a buffer zone between itself and other Great Powers.

With the start of the Second World War, particularly the Soviet-German War, the Chinese central government established control over the territory, which had nominally been part of China, but independently run by warlords under heavy influence from the Soviet Union.

American and British recognition

In 1943, the Chinese government led by Chiang Kai-shek allowed the United States and Great Britain to open consulates in Urumqi and started attacking the Soviet Union's interests in the region.

Moscow became increasingly uneasy with the opening of the U.S. consulate in the territory, which it traditionally considered as its backyard, and was equally uneasy because of the frequent visits to the region by American diplomats and military officials, including U.S. vice president Henry Agard Wallace.

Historical records indicated that the U.S. administration paid attention to the situation in Xinjiang province and suggested that Chiang Kai-shek establish friendly ties with the Soviet Union.

Within this environment, the Soviet Union supported and re-energized the independence struggle of the Uyghurs and other native people in Xinjiang province in order to establish its own influence in the region and dislodge the influence of the United States and Great Britain from this corner of Central Asia.

The second republic

In September 1944, when the Second World War was still raging across Europe and the Asia-Pacific region, Uyghurs and other non-Han Chinese ethnic groups of the Ili region armed themselves and fought against Chinese rule.

On November 12, 1944 they declared the establishment of the East Turkestan Republic.

This new republic received military, political, and financial support from the Soviet Union. On April 8, 1945, the East Turkestan Republic established a regular army and fought against the Chinese Kuomintang forces in three fronts and liberated 26 counties in the Ili, Altay and Tarbaghatay districts as well as in 6 counties in Kashgar and Aksu districts.

Soviet support

According to secret Soviet archives that were opened after the collapse of the Soviet Union, after the United States and Britain had opened consulates in Urumqi, Stalin's politburo decided to support the independence movement of East Turkistan.

Until July 1946, high-level Soviet political and military advisers came from Moscow and regularly stayed in Ghulja, providing aid to the ETR. More than 2000 soldiers and 500 officers from the Red Army served in the National Army of the ETR, which numbered 40,000 soldiers.

The Uyghur struggle for independence grew nationwide, and the Chinese Kuomintang government in Urumqi faced the possibility of defeat. At such a critical time, Stalin forced the East Turkestan leadership to compromise and negotiate with the Chinese Kuomintang government.

After nearly eight months of negotiation under intense pressure from Moscow, a coalition government was established under which the Uyghurs and Chinese would share political power. The coalition government collapsed within a year, and the East Turkestan army resumed fighting against Chinese forces.

Betrayal at Yalta

One of the main reasons Moscow stopped supporting the East Turkestan Republic and forced its leaders to negotiate with the Chinese Nationalist government was the agreement made at the Yalta Conference held on February 11, 1945, in which the Soviets signed a friendship treaty with the Chinese Nationalists.

The meeting among Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill in Yalta guaranteed Stalin's interests in Manchuria and Mongolia, but the newly established East Turkistan Republic became an obstacle in the realization of Stalin's geo-strategic plan in China.

In accordance with the Yalta Agreement, Soviet-Chinese negotiations started in June 1945 and ended in August after the Chinese Nationalist government guaranteed Russian interests in Mongolia and Manchuria. In these negotiations, Chinese Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek demanded from Stalin that Moscow not support East Turkestan independence or provide weapons to the ETR. Moscow assured Chang Kai-shek that the Soviets had no territorial interest in Eastern Turkistan.

Today, Russian, Western, and Uyghur historians believe that the East Turkestan Republic became a pawn in a strategic battle for powers and that the Uyghur people's struggle for freedom and independence was betrayed by the political intrigues of Soviets.

A secular state

The ETR government announced a 9-point declaration on January 5, 1945 establishing the ETR as an independent republic that would treat all religions and peoples equally by embracing democracy and rejecting totalitarianism.

The new republic called for developing education, technology, communications, industry, social welfare and a free health care system. The ETR established various social and education organizations such as a women's association, a veterans' foundation and schools for orphans. Women from Muslim

and non-Muslim ethnic groups participated in military, government, education and work structures equally with men.

The goal of the state's battle was not to establish an independent Islamic religious state but to develop and learn from European states, as remembered in the ETR army song:

The people of Europe flying in the sky,
Through enjoyment of intellectual pursuits;
To develop like Europe we must to learn,
Enemies have no right to claim Uyghur land.

The short-lived East Turkistan Republic was a secular state, and the goal of the Uyghur people was a secular state system with modern democratic standards. Thus, Uyghurs have already experienced secularism and will continue to pursue secularism today and in the future.

A multi-ethnic state

Former high level government and military officials in the ETR have rejected the claims of some state-sponsored Chinese scholars that the ETR had pan-Turkist or Pan-Islamic aims.

The East Turkistan Republic's citizens—Muslim ethnic groups such as the Uyghur, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Tajik, Tunggan (Hui) and non-Muslim groups such as Christian Russians, Buddhist Mongols and Shamanist Shibo—participated in uprisings against Chinese rule and fought for an independent republic.

During its five years, the Ili government devoted the state budget to multi-language education and published 11 newspapers and five magazines in five languages.

Nuclear rivalry

On July, 1949, as the Cold War entered an important period after U.S. ally Chiang Kai-shek's defeat in the war against the communists, Stalin invited a Chinese Communist delegation to Moscow for discussions on establishing a communist government.

Stalin suggested to Mao's representative Liu Shaoqi that Mao establish the PRC before the end of 1949 and enter Xinjiang province as soon as possible to block the establishment of an independent state of local ethnic groups supported by the U.S. and Britain.

During this critical time, Uyghur leaders such as Dr. Mesud Sebiri, Isa Yusuf Aliptekin, Memet Imin Bughra, Kazakh leader Osman Batur, and others wanted U.S. assistance to establish an independent state in this region and to defend against invasion from the Chinese communist army.

But the same time, historical evidence shows, the Soviets planned to build an atomic bomb and searched for necessary materials such as uranium in the territory of ETR.

But after the Soviets tested their first atomic bomb in Semipalatinsk, near East Turkistan, on August 29, 1949, the U.S. consulate in Urumqi officially closed. American vice-consul Douglas McKiernan cooperated with Kazakh rebel leader Osman Batur and escaped to Tibet, but was tragically killed.

Plane crash

Stalin promised to help establish a communist regime in the region. With this support from Moscow, Chinese communist representative Deng Liqun secretly met with leaders of the Ili government and discussed the future of the region.

Both Soviet and Chinese sources indicate that Uyghur leader Ahmetjan Qasimi agreed to go to Beijing and participate in a conference of the political consultative committee of China.

In August 1949, however, the leaders of the government—including Ahmetjan Qasimi—died in a mysterious plane crash en route to Beijing.

Uyghur sources indicate that the ETR leaders were killed by the Soviet KGB in Moscow because they didn't agree to Stalin's demand to obey communist China unconditionally. Based on his promise to China, Stalin sent airplanes and transferred more than 12 thousand Chinese liberation army soldiers and officers, as well as weapons, to Xinjiang.

Chess pieces

In February, 1950, Mao and Stalin signed an agreement of Sino-Soviet friendship in Moscow, and Mao agreed to establish a company that would allow the Soviet Union to extract petroleum, uranium and other resources from Xinjiang province.

After signing the agreement and after the occupation of ETR territory by Chinese troops, the Soviets gave the corpses of the political and military leaders of the Ili government, including Ahmetjan Qasimi and general lieutenant Is'haqbeg Munonov, to the Chinese delegation. Mao ordered Sayfidin Azizi, former education minister of the ETR and member of the Chinese delegation to Moscow, to bring

their bodies to Xinjiang and bury them in Ghulja with honors. At their burials, Mao Zedong called them “revolutionary martyrs” and called their government and revolution a “government of the three districts” which was part of the Chinese democracy revolution.

“Stalin only decided to play us like chess pieces and then sell us out when he didn’t need us in the game,” says one historian, former ETR national army major Mr. Zulpiqarov of Almaty.

PRC policy

In 1955, two years after Stalin’s death, Mao Zedong passed over Stalin’s ethnic autonomous republic policy for the Uyghurs, a system some Uyghurs had hoped he would follow, and decided instead to establish regional autonomy in the province, renaming the area the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

The dream of some Uyghurs after 1949—those who believed the Chinese communists’ earlier promises of self-determination for national minorities—was that the PRC would establish Soviet-style republics. In the end, however, Mao didn’t recognize the right to self-determination of the Uyghurs, Tibetans, Mongols, and others. Chinese leaders justified their choice by explaining that China’s situation was different from that in the Soviet Union.

After the Qingdao meeting in 1957 at which Chinese premier Zhou Enlai strongly criticized Uyghur nationalists, some Uyghur nationalists escaped to Soviet Central Asia. Others died during the Cultural Revolution.

Former Chinese communist leader Deng Xiaoping recognized that Uyghurs’ political situation was still an issue in the 1980s, when he said, “Xinjiang’s fundamental question is [whether it should be] a republic or an autonomous region.”

After the Cold War

But many Uyghurs never lost their dream of having their own republic.

At the end of the Cold War, the breakup of the Soviet Union paved the way for Uyghur movements to move from former Soviet Union Republics to the West, especially the United States.

Previously, even though the U.S. consulate had existed in Urumqi during the 1940s, Uyghurs did not have a chance to understand the U.S. until the 1990s, because Uyghurs had always been caught between China and the Soviet Union.

But as Uyghur issues continued to be hijacked by the Soviet Union to serve its strategic issues in dealing with China, Uyghurs began leaning toward the western world including the U.S. to gain support and sympathy for Uyghur democracy.

Today

But the Xinjiang/Uyghur issue continues to have importance for contemporary Sino-Russian strategic ties and has become an important part of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

This year, on September 26-28, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev visited China and with Chinese president Hu Jintao signed a joint statement emphasizing mutual support for each other's core interests—Russian support for Beijing's sovereignty over Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang, and Chinese support for Moscow's "efforts to promote peace and stability throughout the Caucasian region and the Commonwealth of Independent States."

In addition to sitting at the center of Sino-Soviet relations, the issue of the political fate of the Uyghurs is now also connected to the American detention center at Guantanamo Bay, China's human rights record, and international anti-terrorism measures. American president George W. Bush met twice in 2007 and 2008 with Uyghur leader Rebiya Kadeer, who was nominated several times for the Nobel Peace Prize. On July 5, 2009, decades of Chinese policies in Xinjiang resulted in violence when the unsettled situation in the region simmered over into bloody ethnic clashes in Urumqi.

Even 66 years after the establishment of a secular state in the Uyghur homeland, a republic that was erased off the map, the political fate of the Uyghurs still remains unresolved.