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The Russian Civil War in Chinese Turkestan (Xinjiang), 1918-1921: A Little Known and Explored Front

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The Russian Civil War in Chinese Turkestan (Xinjiang), 1918–1921: A Little Known and Explored Front

MICHAEL SHARE

Abstract

A very important yet little known front in the Russian Civil War existed in neighbouring Xinjiang, a region in China's northwest, that was at that time self-governing. In Xinjiang, Russian White Commanders and their troops gained sanctuary, financial assistance, food and shelter from Chinese provincial leaders, and then used those sanctuaries to launch operations against Soviet forces. However, by 1921, Red Army troops destroyed any remaining organised White forces, which then melted into the Chinese landscape. The ramifications of the Russian Civil War in Xinjiang had important impacts on the people of Xinjiang, and on Russia and China as well.

IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE BOLSHEVIK REVOLUTION, on 7 November 1917, the Bolsheviks controlled both capitals, Petrograd and Moscow, but little else. The Russian Empire swiftly descended into chaos and civil war. During 1918 the newly formed Bolshevik Red Army faced opposing military units in almost every direction: Finland, the Baltic states, Poland, Ukraine, the Caucasus, Siberia and Central Asia. The story of how and why by 1921 the Bolsheviks were victorious against this huge but

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disparate coalition of opponents is well known (Figes 1996; Koenker & Rosenberg 1989; Mawdsley 1987; Lincoln 1999; Wade 2001; Abatsiev 2008; Smirnov 2005a; Volkov 2002). While most Civil War military fronts have been well covered in the existing literature, those in Central Asia and Siberia had attracted relatively little scholarly attention until recently, when a number of Russian language works were published (Olcott 1997, pp. 679–92; Balmasov 2007; Belov 2003; Ganin 2006; Kuzmin 2004; Malisheva & Poznanskii 1996; Shumov & Andreev 2005; Tsiipkin & Ornatskaya 2008).

Moreover, sources recently made available in the Russian archives have revealed the existence of a virtually unknown front, in Xinjiang, in China's northwest. That conflict influenced the course of the Russian Civil War, while the Civil War, in turn, impacted on events in Xinjiang (then called Chinese Turkestan), whose population became more anti-Chinese, nationalistic and economically impoverished. This article explores how these archival sources illuminate historians' understanding of the progress of the Civil War in this region. The story of the Civil War years makes it easier to understand why, during the 1930s, and again under communist rule, discontented elements of Xinjiang's population turned to Soviet Russia in the hope of obtaining support and assistance in throwing off an often weak, yet hated Chinese authority. It was also an object lesson in the difficulties that border provinces situated between two or more major powers faced, should they seek to maintain their own autonomy *vis-à-vis* their stronger neighbours. Disengagement was not always a feasible strategy.

Some caveats are in order. Accounts of the Russian Civil War's ramifications within and beyond Xinjiang rely heavily upon Russian and British diplomatic sources. Neither was unbiased. Tsarist officials viewed Xinjiang as a potential Russian sphere of influence; diplomats who remained loyal to the provisional government had little love for the Bolsheviks or groups aligned with the Red Armies; supporters of the Bolsheviks were likewise hostile toward White forces and those associated with them. In Central Asia as elsewhere, British diplomats leaned toward the Whites, though—like those local officials running the Xinjiang provincial government—eventually they bowed to reality and came to terms with the victorious Red Russian forces and the Moscow regime they represented. All reports now available to historians were therefore filtered through an almost kaleidoscopic variety of lenses, reflecting the political and national interests of their assorted authors. Accounts of the situation within Xinjiang and beyond its borders inevitably reflected these biases.

Xinjiang, the Chinese word for 'the new frontier', belonged to a loose periphery of borderlands that has surrounded China for the past 2,000 years, the former hub of the Silk Road, bordering on eight countries. With an area of over 500,000 square miles, and rich in natural resources, including oil, natural gas and uranium, it is the largest single autonomous region of China, but geographically it is separated from China proper by two great deserts. Its sparse population, estimated at 2.8 million in 1921, has, at least until very recent times, been largely non-Han Chinese, and in fact hostile to the Chinese. While the largest single group were Turkic Uyghurs, there were also thousands of Kazaks, Kirzhiz, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Sart, Taranchins and Russians, all with ethnic cousins across the western border. In addition, Xinjiang had large communities of Manchus, Mongols and Sibo-Solons from East Asia, Chinese Muslims called Dungans or Hui, Tatars, as well as Han Chinese. Thus, Xinjiang had some 14

significant distinct nationalities, most of whom disliked the others, a fact the Chinese skilfully manipulated to maintain control in this fractious ethnic landscape. While Qing China claimed Xinjiang as part of its empire from the mid-eighteenth century, its control remained very loose until the late-nineteenth century, when in 1884 Imperial China formally claimed Xinjiang as a province (Millward 2007, pp. 136–39).

Here, too, three empires met, those of China, Britain and Russia. Xinjiang, also called Chinese Turkestan, often acted as a buffer between Britain and Russia. Prior to 1949, if Chinese central government rule weakened, Britain and Russia frequently directly confronted each other there in a northern extension of the famous ‘Great Game’ (Lattimore 1934, pp. 457–61). From 1912 until his assassination in 1929, during the entire period covered by this article, a former Mandarin judge, Yang Zengxin (Yang Tseng-hsin), governed Xinjiang. Yang ruthlessly ruled the province as an autocrat, brooking no opposition. One grisly example of his style was a Chinese New Year banquet in January 1916. At the beginning of the meal Yang beheaded two officers at the dinner table. Even though the other guests were sprayed with the officers’ blood, the dinner incredibly continued after the bodies were removed. In many ways a last throwback to Imperial China, he believed he could do what he wanted, for the betterment of both Xinjiang and China. Yang Zengxin has enjoyed a mixed reputation. Soviet consular reports were almost uniformly negative, describing his rule as ‘corrupt, xenophobic’, characterising him as a strong Chinese nationalist, who hated his Muslim subjects.¹ Andrew Forbes, who depicts in great detail the bloody Chinese New Year banquet of January 1916, concurs with this harsh analysis describing Yang as ‘paranoid, [a] complete autocrat, isolationist, ignorant, and obsessive in his secrecy’ (Forbes 1986, pp. 11–21). Other historians, including J. A. Millward and L. E. Nyman, also gave unflattering assessments of Yang’s rule (Millward 2007, pp. 180–85; Nyman 1977). By contrast, the famous Sinologist John King Fairbank characterised Yang’s rule as one of high calibre, experienced, facing innumerable challenges without ‘undue taxation’ of the local population, which allowed Xinjiang to progress and modernise (Fairbank 1986, p. 169). The *Cambridge History of China* also presents him in positive terms (Fairbank & Feuerwerker 1986, p. 81). Soviet historians tended to provide one-dimensional and one-sided coverage of the Civil War fronts, taking a very negative view of the entire White movement, and usually portraying all White generals as ‘criminals’, ‘gangsters’, ‘crooks’ and ‘perverts’. In the past 15 years, however, post-Soviet Russian historians have provided a mirror image of the White forces and their commanders, who currently are described as heroes, martyrs, ‘saviours of the homeland’, ‘true democrats’ and ‘freedom fighters’ (Shmaglit 2006; Markovchin 2003; Smirnov 2005b; Luckett 1987; Pereira 1996). Many contemporary biographies of White generals, such as a recent hagiography of General Vladimir O. Kappel, carry the blessing of the Russian Orthodox Church on their covers (Balmasov 2007). Their campaigns are described as attempts to preserve the Russian empire, to overthrow ‘the criminal, Communist regime’ and to lay the

¹ Archive of Foreign Policy for the Russian Federation (*Arkhiv Vneshnei Politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii* hereafter AVP RF), f. 0100v (*Ref-ra po Sintszyan*), op. 2, d. 2, pap. 101, 1920–21, from Barshak, Representative, Special Office, Kuldzha, 5 May 1921, to Zuckerman, Deputy, Special Envoy, Soviet Foreign Ministry, Turkestan, *Ob Iliiskom raione i Urumchi* [About Ili District and Urumchi].

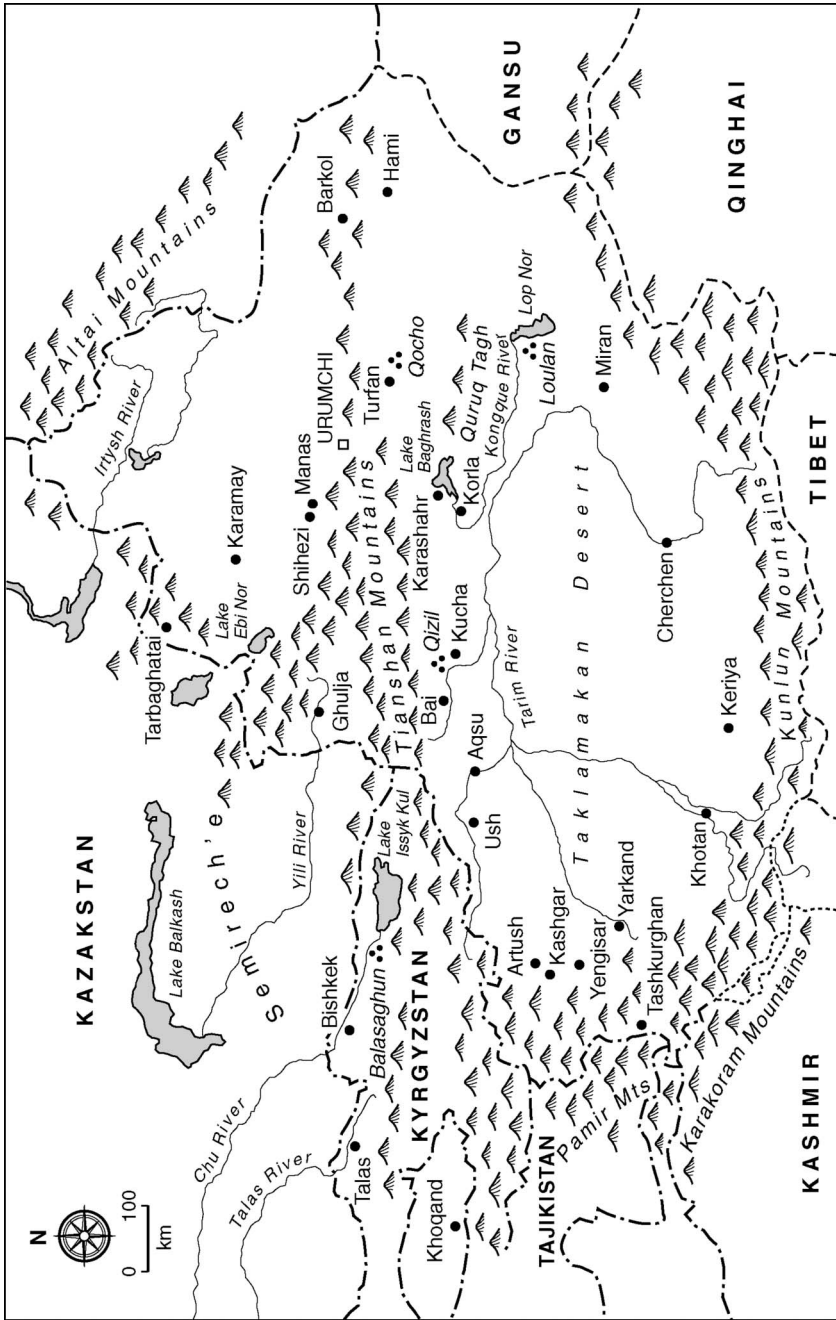


FIGURE 1. THE XINJIANG REGION

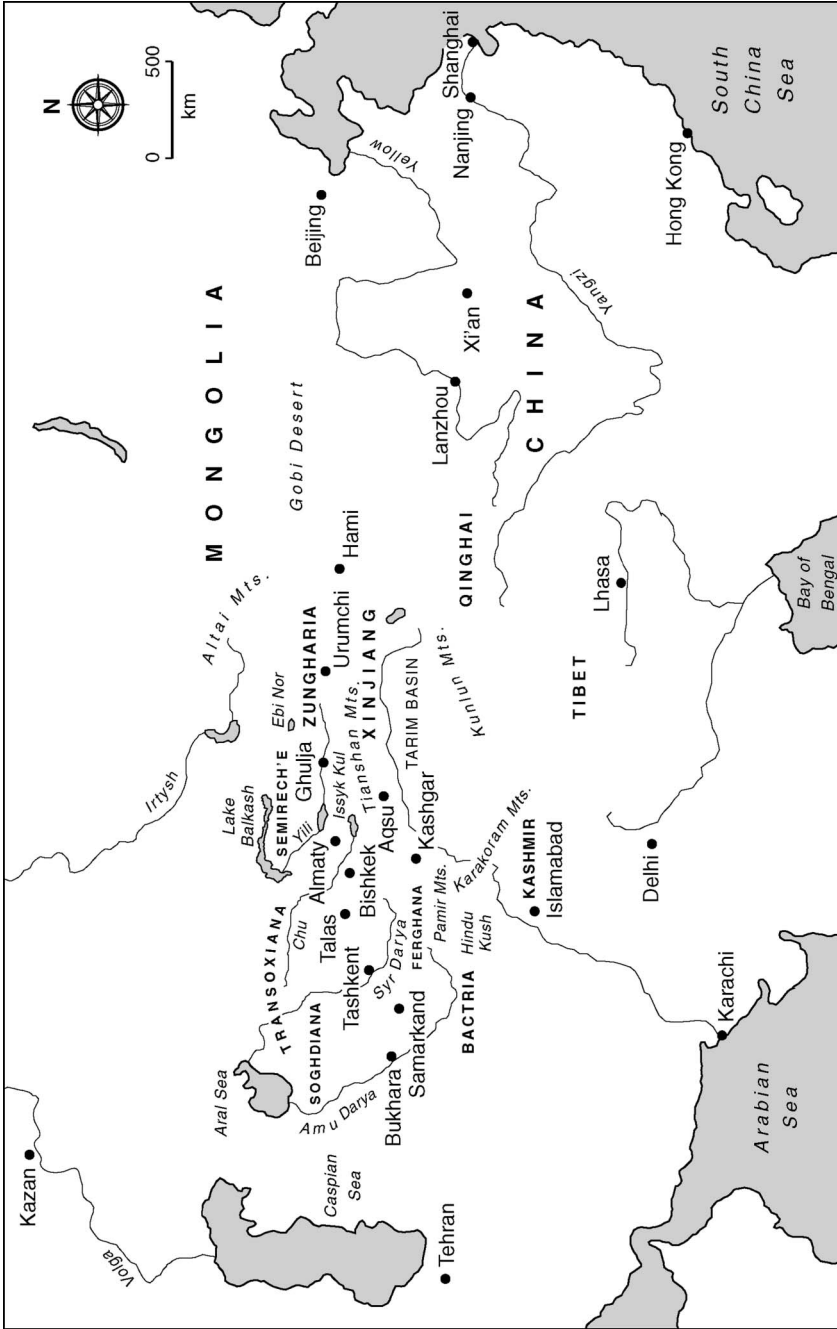


FIGURE 2. XINJIANG, CHINA AND CENTRAL EURASIA

foundations for Russian democracy (Blagovo & Sapozhnikov 2005, p. 3). Thus historiography on the Civil War has been twisted twice, once during the Soviet era, and secondly, since 1990 in the post-Soviet era.

Imperial Russia and Xinjiang

Russian political interest in Xinjiang dates back to the mid-nineteenth century when Russian forces occupying Central Asia began to approach northwestern Xinjiang. Russian economic interest dated back even further as Russian subjects, usually Kazaks, had been trading in Xinjiang along the ancient Silk Road since the early nineteenth century. In 1860 Russia and Qing China signed the Treaty of Peking, which opened the town of Kashgar to trade, and allowed Russia to build a consulate, a church and other buildings (Hui 1942). Taking advantage of the Chinese Imperial government's increasing military weakness, Russia forced Qing China to sign the Treaty of Livadia, which ceded much of the western district of Ili (Yili in Chinese transliteration) to Russia, as well as granting more trade concessions, and making Qing China pay Russia some R5,000,000 as an indemnity. In the meantime, Russia took advantage of anti-Qing rebellions by local Uyghur religious leaders to temporarily occupy the town of Kuldja (Ghulja) in 1871, and received more trade and border concessions under two further treaties, one in 1882 and the other in 1884 (Wheeler 1963, pp. 56–60). Russia sent several scientific expeditions to Xinjiang during the late-nineteenth century, composed of explorers, military officers and diplomats. Trade in tea, precious metals, fur and daily household goods almost quadrupled from R800,000 in 1882 to R3,000,000 in 1916.² The Chinese provincial government in Xinjiang was very friendly to the Russian government, as well as to the large Russian community, which was able to prosper.³

In strategic terms, Russian military and foreign ministry officials considered Xinjiang to be a crucial area for potential Russian expansion, especially since Qing China only had some 17,000 poorly trained and equipped troops there to counter any foreign incursions.⁴ Thousands of Russian citizens poured across the porous border, especially Kazak and Kyrgyz (Kirghiz, Qirghiz) nationals, who had been displaced by a Tsarist Russian settlement campaign (Millward 2007, pp. 185–86). To serve this growing community, a Russian language newspaper, *Semirchenskii Oblast' Vedomosti*, began publishing in December 1910. The Russian government planned to start construction of a new consulate building in Kashgar, one of the major new Russian centres.⁵ It also planned to build a telegraph line with Russia, as the backward territory still lacked any fast communications with the outside world. Virtually all roads were in a very bad state. Despite its nominal ties with Qing China, until the 1917 Revolution Russia remained the predominant power in Xinjiang. In all probability,

²Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (hereafter RGASPI), f. 532, op. 4, d. 328, Rostovsky, *Kharakteristika provintsii Sintszyan* [*Characteristics of Xinjiang Province*], unpublished manuscript, 1935.

³AVP RI, f. *Missiya v Pekin*, op. 761, d. 900, 1900–15.

⁴RGASPI, f. 514, op. 1, d. 48, *Doklad po Sintszyanu* [*Report on Xinjiang*], 10 April 1924.

⁵Archive of Foreign Policy for the Russian Empire (*Arkhiv Vneshnei Politiki Rossiiskoi Imperii* hereafter AVP RI), f. *Missiya v Pekin*, op. 761, d. 775, 1911, Kashgar.

apart from Russia's desire to maintain good relations with Qing China, the only reason why Xinjiang escaped complete absorption by Russia was threats from Britain that annexation might result in war.⁶

Before the outbreak of the 1917 Revolution in Russia, two external events had a significant impact on Xinjiang: first the Chinese Revolution of 1911, and second an anti-Russian uprising in 1916 in large areas of Russian Central Asia.

The Chinese Revolution

The Chinese Revolution succeeded in Xinjiang after the battle of Kora, near Ili, between different Chinese factions on 13 February 1912.⁷ As a result of the Revolution, Commissioner Yang Tseng-hsin (Yang Zengxin) took power in Xinjiang in 1912. Subsequently the Russian Consul-General reported problems between Russia and the new Chinese Republic over customs and taxes, as well as growing complaints that the Chinese were breaking trading agreements. Despite Yang's promises to investigate the situation, conditions for the estimated 30,000 Russian citizens continued to deteriorate.⁸ In Kashgar, Urumchi, Khotan and other cities in Xinjiang, Russians were attacked, their cattle and goods seized, and agreements ignored. The new government raised taxes on land and cattle as subsidies from Beijing ceased. Instability arising from the Revolution also prevented tens of thousands of Kashgar labourers from working in the cotton fields in the neighbouring rich Fergana Valley in Russian Turkestan, cutting off a source of much needed income.⁹ The impoverished local population blamed foreigners for their problems, an attitude the provincial government encouraged. Two waves of deliberately started fires broke out in Khotan in July, and in Kashgar in August 1912, causing heavy loss of life and property to the Russian and British quarters. Nearly 3,000 homes were destroyed in the Khotan fire alone. Outside Kashgar in the nearby town of Shura, on 13 July 1912, rioting Uyghurs and Chinese, including troops blaming Russians for their problems, attacked and killed over 50 Russians.¹⁰ In that chaotic atmosphere, even a suspicious British government welcomed the arrival on 11 September 1912 of some 700 Russian troops commanded by Colonel Bobrov of the Orenberg Cossacks to protect the foreign communities and their consulates in Kashgar and other violence-ridden cities.¹¹ They quickly restored order, but tension remained high between foreigners and locals, and between Han Chinese and local Uyghurs.

The 1916 uprising in Russian Central Asia

In neighbouring Russian Turkestan, growing resentment at the loss of land to Russian colonists, as well as escalating demands from the central government for taxes and the

⁶Public Records Office (hereafter PRO), FO 371/1629, 1913, Sinkiang.

⁷PRO, FO 371/1312, 1912, #5618, Chinese Revolution in Kashgar, 13 February 1912.

⁸AVP RI, op. 761, d. 775, 1911, Kashgar.

⁹PRO, FO 371/1629, 1913, Sinkiang.

¹⁰AVP RI, op. 761, d. 778, *Pismo* [Letter], from Consul S. V. Sokov to Chinese Foreign Ministry official Van Vin Kun, 26 July 1912.

¹¹PRO, FO 371, 1912, #5618, 'Arrival of Russian Troops in Kashgar'.

requisition of cattle, horses and camels, caused a huge uprising during the summer of 1916. The immediate cause was the Russian government's decision to end Kazak exemption from military conscription, as well as the concurrent mobilisation of some half a million people for labour service. While the uprising engulfed most of the cities and steppes in Russian Turkestan, fighting was especially intense in the Semirech'e (Seven Rivers) district, just west of Xinjiang, a region where Russian colonisation was heaviest. There thousands of Russian settlers and troops engaged tens of thousands of Kazak and Kirghiz tribesmen in battles, with frequent massacres and other atrocities by both sides. By the time the Russian army crushed the uprising, more than 3,000 Russians and considerably more non-Russians had been killed, and some 10,000 Russian farms had been pillaged and burned. The consequences for local Kazaks and Kirghiz were catastrophic: over 100,000 tribespeople were killed, and up to another 200,000 fled Russia into Xinjiang.

Although the uprising was the largest to hit the Russian empire between 1905 and 1917, the outside world, preoccupied with World War I, knew little of it (Kappeler 2001, pp. 351–52).¹² Many tribespeople, fighters and families, accompanied by their cattle, took refuge in Kashgar and other towns along the long Xinjiang–Russian border.¹³ The uprising marked the beginning of a period of turmoil for both Russian and Chinese Turkestan, one of warfare, disease and famine that lasted until the early 1920s. Fleeing Kazaks and Kirghiz lost livestock in the harsh mountains, faced attacks from Cossack forces and suffered shortages of food. When they arrived in Xinjiang, local authorities demanded money and livestock. People on both sides of the border faced starvation. While the Uyghur and Kazak populations in Xinjiang initially sympathised with their fellow tribespeople, their hospitality dwindled as their food supplies did. Life became a nightmare for the new arrivals, as people were literally dying of hunger and cold (Brower 2003, p. 163). While most of these hundreds of thousands of refugees returned to Russian Turkestan after the winter months, the unexpected need for Xinjiang authorities to provide food, shelter, clothing, medical care and water only contributed to instability in the huge province.

The 1917 Russian Revolution and Xinjiang

Due to poor communications, news of the revolution in Russia did not reach Xinjiang until 8 April 1917, and it was not until late April that the consulates in Xinjiang finally removed the name 'Imperial' from their front gates. Like Russian consulates and embassies and Russian communities around the world, most Russians in Xinjiang welcomed the news, believing that the new government would bring democracy and victory in World War I. Since communications between Petrograd and Xinjiang were so slow, and there was increasing instability within Russia itself, the consulates played an increasingly important role directing daily affairs within the Russian community in Xinjiang, which numbered over 10,000 in Kashgar alone, and about 30,000 in the

¹²The only book specifically on the uprising is a 50-year-old work (Sokol 1954).

¹³AVP RI, f. *kon-vo v Kashgar*, op. 630, d. 28, 1916.

whole province.¹⁴ The consulates delivered news about developments in Russia not only to the Russian community, but also to the general, mostly Muslim Uyghur population in Kashgar.

At that time Russia had a total of seven consulates in Xinjiang, including missions in Kashgar, Kuldja (also called Ghulja or Ining), Chuguchak (Chughuchaq), as well as a Consulate-General in Urumchi (then called Tihwa) (Ram 1995). These consulates were large, sprawling, walled compounds. The Russian consulate in Kashgar, for example, had some 40 rooms, where people worked, ate and slept. The neighbouring first secretary's house had some 24 rooms. The Russian district in Kashgar included the walled consulate compound, homes for Russian residents, shops, a church, a school, parks, a post office and a barracks for Russian troops, of whom there were usually hundreds in the town. The consulate compound in Chuguchak (Chughuchaq) in the northwest was much smaller and simpler, but still contained the consul's house, the consulate itself, the first secretary's house, trading posts and barracks for Russian soldiers, as well as large gardens.¹⁵

As economic conditions worsened during 1917 the consulates provided an increasingly important relief role for the Russian population, often doling out limited funds (but always requiring receipts). Meanwhile the Russian Orthodox Church played its traditional role providing solace to the community.¹⁶ One of the biggest problems facing the Russian community that year was inflation caused by the large drop in the value of the ruble, which left everyone in increasingly dire economic straits. Russian Foreign Ministry files contain note after note from one consulate after another requesting more money from the Russian Minister in Beijing, Nikolai Kudashev, to compensate for escalating inflation. Whilst one ruble in 1914 equalled 12 taels, during the spring of 1917 it was worth only 3.25 taels, meaning that by 1917 the value of the ruble had fallen to what would have been only 27 kopeks in 1914. The Consul General's monthly salary, only R240 a month, was insufficient to support even a modest lifestyle.¹⁷ Some staff were forced to leave the diplomatic service, as they could not survive on their existing salaries. A drought and the aftermath of the 1916 uprising in Russian Turkestan caused harvest failures in both Russian and Chinese Turkestan, further compounding their problems. To raise money, despite their own severe food shortages, Kashgar and other border cities sent bread across the border. Due to increasing unrest from a hungry local population, on 28 June 1917, Governor Yang banned the export of bread to Russian Turkestan, later even forbidding its transfer from one part of Xinjiang to another.¹⁸ Faced with increasing privations from hunger and poverty, and instability due to the absence of guidance from Russia, the

¹⁴AVP RI, f. *Missiya v Pekin*, op. 761, d. 788, 1916–19, Xinjiang, 'Activities of Consulate in Kashgar'.

¹⁵AVP RI, f. *plany i fotografii* [plans and photos], op. 911, d. 82 and d. 29.

¹⁶However, to celebrate the new government, Russian Muslims wanted to establish a new school, one that would promote their culture as well as its Russian counterpart.

¹⁷AVP RI, f. *Missiya v Pekin*, op. 761, d. 788, 1916–19, Xinjiang, *Deyatel'nost konsul'stva v Kashgare* [Activities of the Consulate in Kashgar]. The 'tael' or 'tenek' was the Xinjiang currency. In 1914, two rubles equalled one US dollar.

¹⁸AVP RI, f. *Missiya v Pekin*, op. 761, d. 788, 1916–19, Xinjiang, *Deyatel'nost konsul'stva v Kashgare* [Activities of the Consulate in Kashgar].

Russian communities in Xinjiang on their own initiative elected Executive Councils (soviets) to govern them during the summer of 1917. Those soviets remained loyal to the consulates and the provisional government.

Much of Russia's trade with China went through Xinjiang. Not just the Russian community, but all people in Xinjiang depended on imports from Russia for their basic daily necessities. For example, Russia shipped such staples as sugar, metals, candles, fish, matches, paper and kerosene to Xinjiang merchants. In return, Xinjiang shipped to Russia cotton, furs, leather and metals.¹⁹ During 1917 trade declined and, facing chaos on both sides of the border, merchants had to pay bribes to assorted officials, while contending with a variety of local currencies, whose values changed almost daily. Prior to 1917 the region had gold and silver rubles, but these disappeared during and after 1917, to be replaced by an increasingly worthless paper ruble.²⁰ More and more, trade was conducted through barter. Compounding these problems was a lack of infrastructure in Xinjiang, including roads, railway lines, and storage facilities for goods awaiting transport. A letter took 20 days to travel from Moscow to Kashgar, while it took eight days for a telegram. Russian offers to build a paved road were not approved by Governor Yang, who favoured maintaining the province's isolation to safeguard its autonomy. Ever fewer goods and products crossed the Xinjiang–Russian border. Whilst in 1915 trade in cotton earned R248,676, this had fallen to R7,020 by the summer of 1917. Income from trade in metals dropped to almost nothing. During 1917 trade almost ceased in daily necessities, such as sugar, candles, fish, meat, kerosene and matches, causing those products to disappear from the markets and shops in Xinjiang.²¹ Without even these basic commodities, life became still harsher for Russians and locals alike.

The Russian community and consulates greeted the Bolshevik Revolution in November 1917 with mixed feelings. On the one hand, many Russians thought the Bolsheviks would bring stability and a resumption of trade. On the other hand, conservative Russian and Kazak merchants and diplomats strongly opposed the hard-line Bolshevik socialist ideology and pledged allegiance to the provisional government. In contrast, local Xinjiang Uyghur and Kazak Muslims thought the Bolshevik Revolution would allow them to gain independence from China, since the 1911 Revolution had only brought greater corruption and repression under Governor Yang.²² Initially the Xinjiang government sympathised with the anti-Bolshevik forces. It allowed the Russian consulates to remain open, and continued to recognise the overthrown provisional government.

¹⁹AVP RI, f. 343, op. 883, d. 1, Consulate General in Urumchi, 1896–1920.

²⁰Russian State Archive of the Economy (*Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennii Arkhiv Ekonomiki*, RGAE), f. 413, op. 14, d. 286, 1924–25, *Ekonomicheskie usloviya v zapadnom Kitae. Rabota v Kul'dzhinskoi ratone* [*Economic Conditions with Western China. Work in the Kul'dinskaya Region*], N. V. Tverutina, *Doklad [Report]*.

²¹AVP RI, f. 343, op. 883, d. 1, Consulate-General in Urumchi, 1896–1920, *Rossiiskaya torgovlya v Urumchi v 1917 godu* [*Russian Trade to Urumchi in 1917*].

²²RGASPI, f. 532, op. 4, d. 328, Rostovsky, *Kharakteristika provintsii Sintszyan, Istoriya predvoennogo Sintszyana* [*Characteristics of Xinjiang Province, History of Pre-war Xinjiang*]. See also Millward (2007, pp. 180–85).

After the Revolution of 1917, international, particularly British, concern over Xinjiang again re-emerged. During 1917 and the subsequent Civil War, with the near temporary collapse of Russian central authority, Britain and Japan moved in to fill the vacuum of power. Britain sought Xinjiang as a buffer zone, fearing Soviet revolutionary ideas could spread southward and spark anti-British nationalism in India. Soon after the Bolshevik Revolution, in 1918, a group of British officers went from India to Kashgar and Tashkent, the capital of Russian Turkestan, to assess the power of the Soviets in Central Asia among the local people. Foreign Secretary Lord Curzon advocated a *cordon sanitaire* policy around the former Russian Empire to contain Soviet control and influence (Members of the Walter Hines Page School of International Relations 1948, pp. 53–63).

Meanwhile, there was a tension between different views on the Soviet side. Bolshevik revolutionary agents sought to win as allies existing liberation movements in India and China, including Muslim tribespeople in Xinjiang. A Soviet report clearly recognised that Kashgar was extremely important as a ‘gateway to India’: ‘Our desire is to go into India. Kashgar is the buffer zone for Britain to prevent the Soviets from going into India. For us Kashgar is the gate. Yet Kashgar (the city) itself has little importance’. However, although they considered it would be easy to provoke a rebellion in Kashgar, as the population there, as in the rest of Xinjiang, was very poor and cruelly ruled in a feudal structure, Soviet representatives feared any rebellion ‘would not be good for the Soviets. It would lead to civil war throughout Xinjiang, which would only cause further repression and massacres’.²³ For those reasons, among others, Soviet Foreign Commissariat diplomats did not seek a revolution for the independence of Xinjiang. While Bolshevik revolutionary agents, many of whom would soon be Comintern activists, sought the overthrow of Xinjiang’s feudal order, Soviet diplomats were cautious and sought to preserve China’s territorial integrity, maintaining that Xinjiang was an integral part of China. In other areas as well, then and later, Bolshevik agents tended to follow a more activist policy, seeking to encourage separatist activities among minority nationalities, while more pragmatic Foreign Commissariat diplomats were readier to accept the status quo (Debo 1992, pp. 344–73, 400–15; Share 2007, pp. 51–80).

The outbreak of civil war and Xinjiang, 1918

As the Civil War engulfed neighbouring Russian Turkestan in 1918, Yang Zengxin, while personally and politically sympathetic to the anti-communists, fruitlessly sought to keep the province neutral (Li Sheng 2005, pp. 114–18). However, Xinjiang would play a major role in the Civil War, first as a launching pad for offensive operations against the Red Army, then as a sanctuary for retreating White forces, and lastly as a battlefield between increasingly dispirited White Guards and confident Red Army troops.

Throughout, the Russian consulates played a major role in providing assistance to the anti-communist forces. The Kashgar consulate was determined to keep Bolshevik

²³AVP RF, f. 0100v (*Ref-ra po Sintszyan*), op. 4, d. 5, pap. 102, 1921–22, A. Yu. Gopneru, Turkestan, to Epstein, Special Official in Xinjiang, Urumchi, 14 March 1922.

propaganda and agents out of Kashgar, located near the frontier and bordering on Bolshevik-controlled areas, to preclude Bolshevik influence on Kashgar's large Russian community.²⁴ As early as 1918, Bolshevik agents were reportedly buying arms in the Kashgar markets. The Russian consulate in Ghulja urged its embassy in Beijing to raise the issue formally with the Chinese Republican government, and request it to ban the import and distribution of Bolshevik books and pamphlets.²⁵ The consulate mentioned it would render aid to all people who would fight the Bolsheviks. To control movements of Russian nationals and exclude all possible Bolshevik agents, the consulate declared on 12 February 1918 that all Russian citizens entering Kashgar must have approval from the consulate. To control the flow of information, particularly to keep out propaganda, the consulate soon censored all mail going to war-torn Russia and barred Russian citizens from entering Kashgar. The consulate lobbied the local Kashgar government to continue the struggle against the Bolsheviks, telling it that the consulate believed the Bolshevik takeover was only temporary, the Bolsheviks did not represent the real government of Russia, and the provisional government would soon return to full power.²⁶ The consulate also assured the Kashgar authorities that the old political and economic agreements remained in force.

The border was, however, very porous. The lengthy Russian–Xinjiang frontier had only six military border posts, each guarded by 24 troops, lightly armed with old-fashioned weapons, at intervals of some 500 *versts* (approximately 330 miles).²⁷ Many border guards were elderly, served on contract, received such low wages that they easily accepted bribes, lived with their families, and were generally more interested in domestic affairs than in border protection. Those districts protected by regular Chinese troops were little better off. They too were easily bribed, corrupt and so poorly paid that their wages only covered basic food costs. Their commanders only gave them bread, forcing the hungry guards to forage for other food supplies. They too were equipped only with old-fashioned Chinese rifles.²⁸ Throughout the huge province, China maintained only some 17,000 troops, described as undisciplined, cruel, drunk, often addicted to drugs and uneducated.²⁹ It was hardly surprising therefore, that Bolshevik agents soon appeared in the markets of Kashgar, buying food and arms and urging Russian nationals to join the Bolshevik cause. With little effect, the Russian consulate in Kashgar banned the export of certain vital goods.

While normal legal trade between Xinjiang and Russian Central Asia almost ceased during this period, only partially resuming after the signing of the Commercial Treaty between the Tashkent soviet and the Xinjiang provincial authorities in late 1920,

²⁴AVP RI, f. *Missiya v Pekin*, op. 761, d. 788, 1916–19, *Sintszyan, deyatel'nost konsul'stva v Kashgare [Xinjiang, Activities of Consulate in Kashgar]*.

²⁵AVP RI, f. 343, op. 883, d. 1, Russian Consulate in Ghuldja to Mission in Peking, 27 July 1920.

²⁶AVP RI, f. 343, op. 833, d. 790, 1918–19, *Sintszyan [Xinjiang]*, Zoskresensky, 'To Russian Mission, Peking, 12 November 1918'.

²⁷The Russian State Military Archive (*Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennii Voennii Arkhiv*, RGVIA), f. 25859, op. 4, d. 8, 1918–19, *Okhrana granitsy I voennye posty: Kazakhsko-Sintszyanskaya granitsa [Border Protection and Military Posts: Kazakh–Xinjiang Frontier]*.

²⁸RGVIA, f. 28105, op. 1, d. 404, 1922, *Doklad ob okhrane sovetsko-kitaiskoi granitsy [Report of Protection of Soviet–Chinese Border]*.

²⁹AVP RF, f. 0100v (*Ref-ra po Sintszyan*), op. 1, d. 1, pap. 101, 1919–21.

smuggling of illegal products flourished. Chinese border guards often looked the other way, and were simply too few to watch the various border crossings, often mountain passes or dirt tracks. During the period from 1918 to 1920, the border guards usually sympathised with the anti-communist White forces.³⁰ When the Red Army turned the tide of battle, despite their personal anti-communist feelings, the border guards pragmatically started favouring Soviet interests, sometimes even disarming retreating White contingents. Soviet intelligence reported that smugglers crossed the frontier in large numbers, often openly in front of the Chinese guards. If guards did try to stop them, the smugglers frequently forcibly resisted, killing the border guards. Products smuggled included arms, ammunition, food, medicines, clothing, people, gold, jewellery, precious stones and even opium. The British reported that both sides, but especially the Bolsheviks, profited from the opium trade. The Chinese cultivated most of the opium in Russian Central Asia, and when they crossed the border into Xinjiang the Bolsheviks heavily taxed the opium.³¹ While smuggling did provide some relief to a starving population, most of the proceeds of smuggled goods went to support the war effort and to maintain armed forces on both sides.

The Kashgar consulate not only sought to control trade, but also became the locomotive for White operations against the Bolsheviks. It raised a small White detachment and sent it to the Semirech'e front across the border. It also tried to establish ties with White operations in Siberia and the Caspian Sea regions. It also set up anti-communist Muslim detachments, composed both of Xinjiang Uyghurs, as well as Kazak refugees from the failed 1916 uprising, using strong anti-communist propaganda to win these tribespeople to the White side. Militating against the Kashgar consulate was the fact that governance for the Russian community was divided between them and the local soviet, founded the previous year. While the soviet stated it had no conflicts with the consulate, the consulate believed it alone knew all the needs and problems of Kashgar's Russian community, and the consulate's orders should be paramount. The consulate claimed that it should determine the duties and tasks for the soviet and that all refugees from the fighting should register with it. The consulate also collected and sent money to the Central Asian front.³²

In a letter to the Consulate-General in June 1918, Cossacks based in Urumchi requested 3,000 guns and 100,000 bullets to fight the Bolsheviks. The Consulate-General agreed, and urged Cossacks to unite with Muslim tribesmen in the struggle against 'godless Communism'.³³ By then, increasing numbers of Russian settlers, Cossacks and Muslims, fleeing after their villages were destroyed in fighting, crossed the border into Xinjiang to obtain food, shelter, clothing and other basic necessities. Men sought help from different Russian consulates so they could regroup, return to Russia, and fight the communist forces. In November 1919 the Kashgar consulate raised another contingent of some 15,000 Kazak and Uyghur Muslims to fight the

³⁰RGVIA, f. 28105, op. 1, d. 404, 1922, *Informatsiya o belykh organizatsiyakh na Kitaiskoi territorii* [Information about White Organizations on Chinese Territory].

³¹PRO, FO 371/8029, 1922, 'Political Situation in Ili'.

³²AVP RI, f. *Missiya v Pekin*, op. 761, d. 790, 1918–19, Xinjiang, Zoskresensky, 'To the Russian Mission in Peking, 12 November 1918'.

³³AVP RI, f. 343, op. 883, d. 1, *Pis'mo ot gruppy Kazakov v Urumchi k Russkomu konsul'stvu* [Letter from a Group of Cossacks in Urumchi to Russian Consulate, 6 June 1918].

Bolsheviks. Dmitri Meshcherskii, the consul in Kashgar, was especially effective in that campaign. In 1919 he raised some R150,000—still, despite inflation, a substantial sum—to support White military units fighting communists in the Fergana Valley and also in the Semirech'e district. At least for a time, Russian consulates delivered effective propaganda by alleging that the Bolsheviks, after victory, would campaign against the practice of Islam. These claims caused Muslim refugees from Russia, as well as local Xinjiang Uyghurs, to contribute men, guns and money to the anti-communist cause. In April 1920, White troops requested money and guns from the Consulate-General in Urumchi, citing similar reasons. By this stage, however, facing impending defeat, these White forces made almost desperate appeals for money and guns, stating bluntly that without funds they would have no power.³⁴

During 1918 the Whites more than held their own in their struggle against the communist Reds. Possessing the sympathy of most of the local population, as well as local, provincial and republican authorities, White contingents, with invaluable assistance from the consulates, raised money, collected men and weapons, and launched operations against communist forces across the border west to the Semirech'e district, northwards into the Kazak steppes, and southwest into the rich Fergana valley. The consulates even assisted White Cossack forces in Orenberg, Siberia, and the Caspian Sea areas. The Russian consulates had critical assistance from the British, who recruited some 25,000 Uyghur and Kazak volunteers to be sent to the Fergana Valley. The British helped the Russians collect large sums of money to fund the force. At the last moment, however, plans for the White incursion into communist-held territory changed, as the British and Russian consulates decided the Fergana Valley was too well defended by forces from the Turkestan soviet and instead sent most of these troops to the Semirech'e, while a much smaller force went to the Fergana in a diversionary attack.³⁵ To meet this attack the Turkestan soviet, the principal Bolshevik governing authority for the region, decided it was crucial to deploy sufficient Red Army troops and police, heavily armed with rifles and artillery, in the Pamir border region.³⁶ In June 1918, after receiving money, guns and bullets from the Consulate-General in Urumchi, Cossacks, together with Muslim tribesmen, furious because Bolsheviks had destroyed their villages, regrouped and attacked Red Army forces in the Semirech'e.³⁷ The Chinese provincial authorities in Xinjiang urged White forces based in the province to launch operations against the Red Army. The Whites then crossed the Ili River into Russian territory, where Cossack villagers joyfully greeted them.³⁸ Thus throughout 1918, White Cossack forces, well armed and well funded, successfully launched operations across the border against communist forces directed by the Turkestan soviet.

³⁴AVP RI, f. 343, op. 883, d. 1, *Pis'mo [Letter]* to Consulate-General, April 1920.

³⁵RGVIA, f. 25859, op. 4, d. 8, 1918–19, *Ohkrana granitsi i voennie posti: Kazakhsko-Sintszyanskaya granitsa [Border Protection and Military Posts: Kazakh–Xinjiang Report Frontier]*, *Doklad [Report]* by Special Official from the Commissariat of Internal Affairs, M. S. Popov.

³⁶RGVIA, f. 25898, op. 1, d. 88, 1918, Pamir Border Region, to Chairman, Soviet People's Commissar, Turkestan Republic.

³⁷AVP RI, f. 343, op. 883, d. 1, 'Consulate-General in Urumchi, 1896–1920', *Pis'mo [Letter]* from a group of Cossacks in Urumchi to Russian Consulate, 6 June 1918.

³⁸AVP RF, f. 0100v, op. 1, d. 1, pap. 101, 1919–21.

Initially the Chinese Republican government in Beijing (then called Beiping), as well as the Xinjiang provincial government, were hostile to the Russian communists. Archival reports admitted that Bolshevik soviet officials in Turkestan made numerous errors. From August 1918, for example, soviet officials infuriated the Chinese Turkestani population in the Russian Turkestan border town of Osh by violating various trade treaties, as when Sretenskii, head of the governing Osh soviet, ordered searches and seizures of Uyghur goods and money. In November Sretenskii ordered a military assault on the largely Uyghur old Sarai district in Osh, that destroyed much of the area, in the process killing numerous Uyghurs, and stealing their jewellery, money and other merchandise. Most merchants fled to Xinjiang, where they reported the incident to the local authorities. While archival reports claimed the Uyghurs had exaggerated the incident, the Xinjiang government protested fiercely, banned all Xinjiang trade with Russian Turkestan, and forbade all Soviet representatives to enter China. This brought further escalation of the already high levels of inflation, along with the disappearance of rice, flour, horses and food on both sides of the border. British purchases of bread and other products in Kashgar also contributed to inflation there.³⁹

The new Soviet government based in Moscow realised the situation had become dangerously inflammatory, and that it must repair this breach in relations with Republican China. First, Moscow decided it must pay great attention to developments in this neglected region. To combat the anti-Soviet propaganda circulated by the Russian consulates and also by the British and Japanese governments, the Soviet Foreign Commissariat (*Narkomindel*) determined to convince the Chinese authorities that the Russian Revolution was not dangerous to China. Secondly, Moscow purged the Osh soviet and replaced its officials. However, despite these attempts to remedy the situation, Soviet–Chinese relations suffered another setback in February 1919 when Red Army units destroyed White forces near Osh, and after their victory, the undisciplined Red Army forces again raided, robbed and burned down the Sarai district in Osh, killing several Uyghurs. The remaining merchants fled with their families to Xinjiang.⁴⁰

The fortunes of war change in favour of the Bolsheviks

Narkomindel determined to take all measures necessary to heal the rift between the two states, a process that took some time, but was helped by the fact that, in the course of 1919, the fortunes of war began to change in favour of the Bolsheviks. Following defeats on the battlefield in neighbouring Kazakhstan on the Central Asian front, increasing numbers of White Guards and Cossacks began retreating into Xinjiang, which granted them sanctuary. Most remained near the border regions, especially in the rich Ili and Tarbagatai districts. Bolshevik intelligence never ascertained the exact

³⁹AVP RF, f. 0100v (*Ref-ra po Sintsyzan*), op. 2, d. 2, pap. 101, 1920–21, *Sovremennaya situatsiya v Kashgare* [*Contemporary Situation in Kashgar*].

⁴⁰RGVIA, f. 25859, op. 4, d. 8, 1918–19, *Okhrana granitsy i voennye posty* [*Border Protection and Military Posts*].

numbers of White troops in Xinjiang but they thought there were potentially tens of thousands.⁴¹

Acquiring arms became increasingly problematic for the Whites. Communist agents in Ghulja (Kuldja) reported that the Chinese district governor there sold arms in return for drugs.⁴² In Xinjiang, White forces regrouped, and then often launched offensive operations against the Red Army, retreating back to Xinjiang once the battle was over. When an offensive in 1919 into the Dgerkent district in Russian Turkestan proved unsuccessful, for example, White forces quickly retreated back into Xinjiang. Governor Yang knew that Bolshevik forces would inevitably pursue White forces into Xinjiang, causing fighting, and consequently requested compensation from the Russian Embassy in Beijing for any death and destruction of Chinese nationals' property. The embassy had little money, however, so the minister evaded the Chinese request.⁴³

Several White commanders established headquarters in various border cities, as well as in Urumchi, because they believed locals would actively oppose the Bolsheviks. Colonel Sedorov, for example, took refuge in Ili. Ataman Aleksandr I. Dutov, commander of the Orenberg Cossacks, made his headquarters in Suidan outside Ghulja, and General Boris V. Annenkov, who had operated with White leader Admiral Aleksandr Kolchak, fled with his forces to Urumchi as the Siberian front collapsed. Dutov intended to use his close-to-the-border sanctuary to regroup, and then launch a White offensive to capture the largest city in Kazakhstan, Verny (present day Almaty), hoping Central Asian peoples, mostly Muslims, would then rise up against the Bolsheviks. Yet Dutov's subordinate officers refused to carry out his orders,⁴⁴ believing the war was already lost. Units belonging to Generals Schebarkov and Pranchvar also took shelter near the border. Bolshevik leaders complained that the White units received assistance all along the border, and urged Moscow to demand that the Chinese stop helping the Whites, a request that went largely unheeded. Many Bolsheviks believed the future lay with them, claiming that the Chinese people were on the verge of another revolution, with the communist movement becoming stronger and stronger. Red Army units claimed that some Chinese border troops, especially Dungans, had deserted to the Bolshevik side.⁴⁵

In the Ili district, Red Army intelligence units crossed the border and wrote reports containing excellent detailed maps, pinpointing the best positions for defence and attack for the Bolshevik infantry, cavalry and artillery.⁴⁶ Thus, when the Red Army later invaded western Xinjiang, they knew the terrain precisely.

⁴¹RGVIA, f. 28105, op. 1, d. 404, 1922, *Informatsiya o belykh organizatsiyakh na Kitaiskoi territorii* [*Information about White Organizations in Chinese Territory*].

⁴²RGVIA, f. 25859, op. 4, d. 8, 1918–19, *Okhrana granitsy i voennye posty* [*Border Protection and Military Posts*].

⁴³RGVIA, f. 25859, op. 2, d. 27, 1919, *Tashkentskii voennii revolyutsionnyi sovet* [*Tashkent Military Revolutionary Council*].

⁴⁴State Archive of the Novosibirsk Region (*Gosudarstvennii Arkhiv Novosibirsk Oblast*, GANO), f. 1146, op. 1, d. 135, pp. 81–82, found in Malisheva and Poznanskii (1996).

⁴⁵RGVIA, f. 25859, op. 3, d. 7, 1919, no legible name, Political and Military Commissar, *Dzharkentskogo raiona*, Semirech'e Region.

⁴⁶RGVIA, f. 1111, op. 3, d. 74, 1919, *Operatsionnyi otdel shtaba voisk* [*Operations Department of HQ of Troops*], Semirech'e district, Ili River.

These units scouted the Ili River, determining its navigability, as well as the defensibility of islands along the river. The Bolsheviks wrote a very long report outlining one secret mission ordered by the Party Central Committee in Moscow, which was to travel to the Ili district in late 1919. They believed prevailing disorder generated considerable dissatisfaction with the existing political situation in Xinjiang, which had always been dependent on Russian imports and trade. British and Imperial Russian consular pressure forced local authorities in Xinjiang to close the border and bar any trade with the new Soviet state. The resulting impoverishment of the population, denied even basic commodities, offered the Bolsheviks revolutionary opportunities throughout the province.⁴⁷ The Bolshevik mission would aim to build a relationship and conduct propaganda among Ili's poor, urging them to overthrow the authorities there and elsewhere in Xinjiang. The mission comprised 14 people, including two members of the Central Committee of the Communist Party from the Turkestan soviet in Tashkent, two military commissars from Turkestan, two from the Council of Professional Unions, two from a food relief committee and others selected for their knowledge of the Ili district. As an indication of the mission's importance, it was provided with a fully equipped aeroplane (a highly visible adjunct that rather undercut its orders to avoid attracting attention). As most of Ili's population was Muslim, the orders stated that the mission's personnel should be Muslims who were familiar with the local languages: 'Only in extreme cases could [ethnic] Russians, who freely speak local languages, be appointed'.⁴⁸ The group carried papers stating all were tradesmen. The soviet instructed the mission that if it was impossible to conduct propaganda activities on the ground, at a minimum they were to drop proclamations and leaflets by air. When the delegation arrived in Ili, they were expected to contact local revolutionary leaders and organisers. The Turkestan soviet, as well as the Soviet Commissariat of Foreign Affairs (*Narkomindel*), provided them with the necessary funds. Unfortunately, so far all archival efforts to unearth reports from the mission after its return to Soviet territory have been unsuccessful.

As the fortunes of war shifted more in favour of the Bolsheviks, the Xinjiang authorities proved ever more hesitant to give permission for White commanders to launch offensive operations. General Annenkov's units, for example, fired on Chinese border guards as they crossed the border.⁴⁹ In late November 1919 Annenkov attacked and killed some 257 troops from Bolshevik commander Cherkashev's unit, capturing Cherkashev himself. These offensive operations from Chinese soil only infuriated the Chinese, who—once given gold—allowed Bolshevik forces to pursue Annenkov and other White units into Xinjiang. The Soviet Turkestan Military Command based in Tashkent therefore asked Moscow to send gold for bribes.⁵⁰ These

⁴⁷AVP RF, f. 0100v, op. 1, d. 1, pap. 101, 1919–21.

⁴⁸RGVIA, f. 25859, op. 3, d. 7, 1919, *Proekt organizatsii sekretnoi missii v provintsyu Ili* [Project of Organisation of Secret Mission to Ili Province].

⁴⁹RGVIA, f. 25859, op. 3, d. 7, 1919, *Proekt organizatsii sekretnoi missii v rovintsyu Ili* [Project of Organisation of Secret Mission to Ili Province].

⁵⁰RGVIA, f. 25859, op. 2, d. 27, 1919, *Tashkentskii voennyi revolyutsionnyi sovet* [Tashkent Military Revolutionary Council], Main Headquarters.

offensive actions caused a breach between General Annenkov and his fellow White General, Dutov. Once Annenkov and his forces entered Urumchi, both Dutov and Annenkov sold arms locally instead of handing them over to the Chinese.⁵¹ To avoid almost certain execution by the Chinese, Dutov turned on his old friend, and persuaded the Xinjiang government that Annenkov was the real threat to the provincial authorities. Governor Yang feared that Annenkov's continued use of Xinjiang as a sanctuary would only provoke more Soviet military incursions. Roving northwest of Urumchi in 1920, Annenkov was lured to Governor Yang's official residence in Kucheng for a weekend of eating and drinking. Instead, the Xinjiang government arrested Annenkov and imprisoned him in Urumchi (where his health was undermined through a longstanding opium addiction), and demobilised his 1,500-man unit. Soon afterwards, Yang transferred Annenkov to Gansu, where the pro-Soviet warlord, General Feng Yuxiang, turned him over to the Soviet authorities in 1926.⁵²

The Bolsheviks, however, had their own problems keeping order among their men. Soldiers told their officers to win the war quickly, otherwise they would go home, while others furiously criticised the lack of food, weaponry and military equipment. These units were responsible for civilian atrocities, looting and burning villages and towns. Red Army officers reported the mood among their men was volatile. Soldiers doubted their cause and asked why they had to serve a second year. Some troops even declared: 'We were cheated. We were conscripted for six months, then another six months. Now after one year, we will have to serve another year'.⁵³ Commanders sent numerous requests to Tashkent requesting more food supplies, as well as weapons to keep their troops in line. When the Turkestan soviet urged Red Army forces to launch a general offensive across the Ili River into Xinjiang, the local Bolshevik commander Kichatov replied that they lacked the military equipment. He wrote: 'We have more than 1,000 soldiers, but we have no cartridges. Please send us equipment, or our soldiers will start to be cowardly under the influence of [White] provocateurs'.⁵⁴ When no equipment was sent, the Whites took the opportunity to attack, and on 12 December 1919, temporarily pushed the Bolshevik units back.

As the Civil War shifted decisively during 1920 to the Bolsheviks, ever more Whites took refuge in Xinjiang. At that point, Red Army troops began offensive military operations against these White forces in border districts and cities such as in Ili and Chughuchaq. While agents of the Tashkent soviet had operated since 1919 in Xinjiang, the first official party of Bolsheviks arrived in Ili in 1920. At the same time Colonel Sedorov, who had fought the Bolsheviks in the Semirech'e and been defeated

⁵¹PRO, FO 371/6630, 1921, 'Political Situation in Russian and Chinese Central Asia'.

⁵²On 25 August 1927, a military court in Semipalatinsk ordered Annenkov's execution, which was immediately carried out (Gurevich 1990, pp. 92–102; Nyman, 1977). RGVIA, f. 28105, op. 1, d. 404, 1922, *Informatsiya o Belykh organizatsiyakh na Kitaiskoi territorii* [*Information about White Organizations on Chinese Territory*]. Post-Soviet Russia has rehabilitated both Annenkov and Dutov, calling them 'Russian patriots' (Barmin 2005a, 2005b; Voennaya istoriya 2009; Bol'shaya Sovetskaya Entsiklopediya 2009).

⁵³RGVIA, f. 25859, op. 3, d. 8, 1919, Bishket, *Doklady o detalyakh i politicheskoi deyatel'nosti* [*Reports about Details and Political Activities*].

⁵⁴RGVIA, f. 25859, op. 2, d. 27, 1919, Kichatov, *Komandir garizona* [Chief of the garrison] to Bobbilev, Head, *Semirechenskii voennyi otdel* [Semirech'e Military Department], November 1919.

there, took refuge in Ili. The Bolsheviks told the Ili authorities that unless Sedorov and all other Whites left Ili, the Red Army would occupy the entire district. At that point the *Taoyin* (leader) of Ili, Xu Kuo Chan, went to the border and signed an agreement with the Bolsheviks pledging that China would not assist the Whites.⁵⁵ In August 1922 the British consulate in Kashgar reported that a Bolshevik named Mohammedov had murdered Sedorov, eliminating any possible competition to Bolshevik power in the Ili district.⁵⁶

During the summer of 1920 bandit gangs, the remnants of General Averanov's military units, some 1,600 men armed with 18 heavy cannons, conducted raids along the Soviet–Xinjiang border, especially in the Baratola Mountain Crossing, north of Ghulja, a White stronghold for launching raids. Averanov's units co-ordinated their attacks with those of Assaula Martamalanova, a Kazak chief, on the Soviet side of the border. As lightly armed Chinese border guards could do little, Red Army forces of some 1,600 troops, commanded by General Lavranovskii, invaded Xinjiang and liquidated Averanov's forces, as well as those of Martamalanova.⁵⁷ In June 1920 Bolshevik troops also entered Xinjiang, some 40 kilometres from Ghulja, to fight General Dutov, who commanded 8,000 troops and 1,300 officers.⁵⁸ Most of General Dutov's troops, based in the Ghulja area in Suidin district, were from Orenberg in the Ural Mountains. For a while those troops operated fairly freely as the Chinese border guards sympathised with them. In return for a sanctuary inside China and financial assistance, food and arms, Dutov promised Governor Yang he would give China the Semirech'e region after his planned offensive into Central Asia succeeded (Ganin 2006). The Chinese agreed and supplied Dutov with arms, food and ammunition.

While wishing Dutov full success, the Chinese feared his likely defeat would trigger a Soviet invasion of Xinjiang. The Chinese therefore decided not to let Dutov's troops return to Xinjiang, should they be defeated. The troops were also assisted by Kirghiz tribes on the other side of the border, who regarded the Whites as ethnic cousins, providing them with valuable intelligence on Soviet military movements. Some of the Whites' relatives still lived in villages near the border, from whence they furnished secret information on Soviet border troop numbers, weapons and deployments. On the whole, most of the population opposed the establishment of Soviet power.⁵⁹ To gain additional popular support, when he arrived in Xinjiang, Dutov brought along Russian doctors, who established a hospital for the local population who lacked any significant medical care. As hungry as the White forces were, their commanders told

⁵⁵PRO, FO 371/8029, 1922, 'Political Situation in Ili'.

⁵⁶PRO, FO 371/80006, 1922, 'Kashgar Diary'.

⁵⁷Some Soviet Military archive (RGVIA) documents claimed that Soviet troops always invaded Xinjiang with the permission of the Chinese authorities and with the best intentions, yet other contemporaneous archival reports wrote that the Chinese border guards in the Baratola Mountains were very corrupt, hated communism and provided Averanov with valuable intelligence. All attempts by Soviet counterintelligence agents to cross into that district were unsuccessful. Border guards brutally and slowly executed them all by putting them into holes and pits. AVP RF, op. 1, d. 1, pap. 101, 1919–21, Filippov, Deputy Head of Information Department, OVC, Tashkent, *Doklad Chicherinu i Trotskomu* [Report to Chicherin and Trotsky], 23 November 1921.

⁵⁸AVP RI, f. 343, op. 883, d. 1, 1920, *Pismo iz rossiiskogo konsulstva v Kul'dzhe v konsulstvo v Urumchi* [Letter from Russian Consulate in Kuldja to Consulate in Urumchi].

⁵⁹RGVIA, f. 28105, op. 1, d. 404, 1922.

them things were worse on the other side of the border, where famine gripped the entire country, and people of all ages were dying in large numbers, with estimates of those dead of hunger ranging up to five million (Figs 1996, pp. 775–80).

Bolshevik victory and military intervention, 1920–1921

By 1920 both Chinese national and provincial authorities recognised that the Bolsheviks were winning the Civil War, and that they had better come to terms with the new regime. They therefore became less responsive to the numerous requests for help from the consulates in Xinjiang. In May 1920 the Chinese agreed to allow a Soviet trade mission in Ghulja (Kuldja) and on 10 July, a Bolshevik mission arrived in Ghulja to sign a trade agreement, called the Ili Protocol.⁶⁰ The local authorities in Ghulja agreed to allow the Bolsheviks to establish a political office in the old Imperial consulate there, which became the nucleus for a full consulate when diplomatic relations were established between the Soviet Union and China in 1924. In return, the Chinese were able to establish a trade office in Verny (Almaty), while Russia renounced its claims on Xinjiang, which the Chinese resented. In September 1920 a group of Comintern agents went from Tashkent to Xinjiang, as part of a trade delegation from *Vneshtorg* (the newly created Soviet trade organisation). In Xinjiang they met Russian and local communists. All were scattered, unorganised and lacked money.⁶¹

In late 1920 Xinjiang reopened the border and signed a commercial treaty with the Tashkent soviet. On 20 October, a large Bolshevik mission of some 22 people arrived at Irkultam on the Russo–Chinese border.⁶² By no means were all members of this large mission there for commercial purposes; it also included Comintern agents, whose prime purpose was to conduct revolutionary propaganda. In Xinjiang they met Russian communist agents but, fearing arrest by the nervous Xinjiang authorities, they had to be very careful. Soviet officials conducted a dual game: on the one hand, they agitated among the Muslim Uyghurs, who sought separation from China; on the other hand, they negotiated with Yang Zengxin's government 'to discuss the mutual protection of mutual interests'. Comintern agents conducted propaganda among both Chinese and Uyghur workers, as well as the increasingly impoverished Russian refugees.⁶³

Yet the Bolsheviks were not always popular with the indigenous population. Dislocated by civil war and isolated, the Semirech'e urgently needed food and consumer goods. Exasperated by the Bolsheviks requisitioning their scarce food supplies, starving peasants and tribesmen in the Semirech'e rose up against the Bolsheviks in November 1920. Badly led, the uprising quickly failed. Chinese and Soviet scholars later claimed that White Russian forces started this 'commotion', which they alleged had little local support (Li Sheng 2005, pp. 114–18).

⁶⁰AVP RF, op. 1, d. 1, pap. 101, 1919–21.

⁶¹RGASPI, f. 544, op. 4, d. 36, February 1921–June 1922. Podznikov was the author of the report.

⁶²PRO, FO 371/6630, 1921, 'Political Situation in Russia and Chinese Central Asia'.

⁶³RGASPI, f. 544, op. 4, d. 36, 9 February 1921, 'Comintern People in Xinjiang'.

That same month, another Bolshevik mission arrived in Kashgar, again seeking both trade and a permanent presence in the city. That mission also included Comintern agents, who organised meetings to conduct propaganda among the poor populace in the city and nearby countryside. The Bolsheviks found a very receptive environment for their revolutionary efforts, as the Chinese troops were disaffected minority Dungans (Hui) and Kirghiz, who lacked food and pay. Dungan garrisons had rebelled several times against the central authorities, both Qing and Republican (Millward 2007, pp. 117–18, 165, 167, 168). The local population had had enough of rampant corruption, bribery, lawlessness, a lack of schools and newspapers, and spiralling inflation. Local poor people asked when the Bolsheviks would liberate them from the ‘dirty hands of wild Asian colonisers—Chinese’.⁶⁴ Yet in all cases, Comintern agents met small, divided, isolated, scattered groups, and had to operate very secretly to avoid arrest.⁶⁵ The largest group Comintern agents made contact with were members of the Uyghur nationalist organisation *Sharq* (East), which sought to end Chinese rule and establish an independent Uyghurstan, and was especially active in the Ghulja area.⁶⁶ It was hardly surprising that the Bolsheviks freely recruited new members in the north, while the Chinese could do little but watch apprehensively the advent of a new, more powerful Russia.

As a conciliatory gesture to the new Russian regime, the Xinjiang government increasingly distanced itself from the former provisional government and its remaining representatives. Letters from the various consulates during the summer of 1920 described a deteriorating situation. Wages dropped daily as the old imperial ruble decreased at an accelerating rate and bought little. Consulates lacked money to purchase new equipment, or even paper for their documents. Consular employees reported they lacked food, clothing and shoes, and did not know how they would survive the winter. Consular officials wrote appeals to the Chinese government for aid that went unanswered. On 23 September 1920, the Republic of China ordered the closure of all Imperial Russian consulates throughout the country, including Xinjiang. Consular officials had roughly two weeks to prepare their closure and all faced a very uncertain future. On 2 October, all Russian consulates and the former Imperial Mission in Beiping (Beijing) were closed. The Chinese Republican government affirmed it would maintain friendly relations with the Russian people, and would protect the lives and property of all Russians living in China.⁶⁷ In these final weeks consular employees wrote numerous very sad, desperate letters. After the closure of the old Imperial consulates around China, all their property, including buildings, furniture and papers, was left in the custody of the Chinese Republican government, which promised to safeguard these valuables.⁶⁸ Bravely, the consular officials pledged

⁶⁴AVP RF, f. 0100v, op. 2, d. 2, pap. 101, 1920–21, *Doklad [Report]* to Zuckerman, Deputy Special Envoy from Soviet Narkomindel, 5 May 1921, Khuldzh, Barzhak, Representative, Soviet Office.

⁶⁵RGASPI, f. 544, op. 4, d. 36, 9 February 1921, author, Shamud, *Doklad o rabote Kominternu v Sintszyane [Report on work of Comintern in Xinjiang]*.

⁶⁶RGASPI, f. 514, op. 1, d. 48, April 1924, *Doklad po Sintszyanu [Report on Xinjiang]*.

⁶⁷PRO, FO 371/6612, 1921, Special Bureau of Information, ‘Weekly Report’ No. 40, 27 November 1920.

⁶⁸AVP RI, f. 343, op. 883, d. 1, ‘Consulate-General in Urumchi, 1896–1920’, *Ofitsial’nye pis’ma i doklady [Official Letters and Reports]*.

they would return after the Whites triumphed in the Civil War, a victory that never materialised. The last non-Bolshevik Consul-General, Aleksei Diakov, based in Urumchi, retired to pursue ethnographic research (Nyman 1977). White commanders lost valuable sources of communication, assistance and support when the Imperial consulates closed.

Meanwhile, Bolshevik efforts to suppress White forces continued, and combined Red Army and Chinese Army detachments liquidated many remaining White units in Xinjiang. By 1921 most organised White offensive operations had ceased. After encountering increasing hostility from the local authorities, White troops demobilised altogether, some becoming tradesmen, some farmers, others even bandits. Fearing the presence of increasingly unruly, armed foreign troops on their soil, and not wanting poor relations with the Soviet Union, the Xinjiang authorities forcibly disarmed those White troops who would not voluntarily give up their weapons. Local incompetence, however, often meant disarmament was poorly conducted, and many White soldiers kept their weapons, while other armaments were stored in poorly guarded buildings, easily accessible if needed. One White Commander, General Andrei S. Bakich, refused to cooperate with the Xinjiang authorities. To bolster his resistance, two Japanese officers, Nagamini and Sato, arrived in Chughuchaq, where they promised to give Bakich some 300,000 silver rubles, and to win assistance from the Chinese.⁶⁹ Bakich declared himself the representative of Russia's supreme state authority (the deposed provisional government) in Xinjiang, claiming he represented the entire Russian community (Gurevich 1990). Bakich's forces did not, however, endear themselves to locals when they looted villages, stole cattle and destroyed peasants' harvests.

At the same time, the Oirat (Kalmuk) minority in the capital of Urumchi rebelled. Provincial government officials, from the Governor downward, sought to obtain as much money as possible through bribes and open corruption, while levying high taxes on a long suffering population. Since many Chinese disliked Oirats (Kalmuks) in general, the minority was a particular target. A local official, Shan Sun Di, stole Xinjiang state gold, silver and stock certificates and sent them to Shanghai.⁷⁰ Two Oirat regiments rose up in support of Bakich, seeking to restore the old Qing dynasty and win full recognition for the independence of Outer Mongolia, which had seceded from China in 1912. Bolstered by support from White units commanded by Annenkov, the rebellion spread, its goal to overthrow General Yang.⁷¹

As conditions worsened, on 17 May 1921, Governor Yang authorised the Red Army to enter Xinjiang to destroy all remaining White forces, which continued to launch provocative and destructive cross-border raids. 'Not having enough troops to wipe out the White gangs, the Chinese government agreed to allow Red Army units to cross the border into Chinese territory for joint action against Bakich. After this action, Red Army units would immediately withdraw' (Gurevich 1990, pp. 99–100). In return for military assistance, China agreed to supply Soviet forces with food and

⁶⁹ GANO, d. 136, pp. 2–3, found in Malisheva and Poznanskii (1996).

⁷⁰ AVP RF, f. 0100v, op. 5, d. 4, pap. 103, 1923, To Zuckerman, Head of Central Asian Department, Narkomindel, Moscow, *Sobytiya v Urumchi [Urumchi Events]*, Secretary, Soviet Office, Ghulja, 18 January 1922.

⁷¹ AVP RF, f. 0100v, op. 2, d. 2, pap. 101, 1920–21, *Doklad [Report]* by official, Pechatnikov, No. 31, 12 August 1921.

transport. Lev M. Karakhan, Deputy Commissar for Foreign Affairs and soon-to-be Ambassador to China, directed that Soviet forces ‘need to use all measures to disarm the Whites in Kashgar and Western Mongolia’. The commander of the Military Revolutionary Council in Siberia agreed, but the operation could begin only later that month, after available forces had defeated the forces of ‘the Mad Baron’, General Roman Nikolai Maximilian Ungern von Shternberg, which had taken control of much of Outer Mongolia.⁷² Von Shternberg’s recent biographies in both English and Russian are almost uniformly unflattering and hostile, describing him as fanatic, cruel, anti-Semitic, racist, a sadist and a bandit responsible for numerous atrocities, including the massacre of virtually all of Urga’s (Ulan Bator’s) Jewish population, men, women and children, often after torture and rape, following the White seizure of that city in 1921 (Belov 2003; Sokolov 2007; Kuzmin 2004; Palmer 2008).

In the course of the summer of 1921, combined Xinjiang and Red Army forces led by General Klementiev forced General Bakich to retreat deep into Xinjiang through the Gobi Desert. Bakich nonetheless managed to avoid the complete destruction of his forces. He retreated into northern Xinjiang, namely the Altai District, completely occupying and clearing the area, including its capital, Sarasume, of Chinese troops. At that time, Bakich desperately sought any available allies. He promised independence to local Kirghiz and Kazak tribes in exchange for their support. Simultaneously, however, Bakich also contacted independent Mongol leaders, promising to cede the Altai to Mongolia in exchange for their support against Chinese and Soviet forces. Bakich also tried unsuccessfully to contact von Shternberg, by then the dictator of Outer Mongolia after his capture of its capital, Urga (present-day Ulan Bator) in February 1921.

At first Bakich’s policy proved successful, and consequently he received large quantities of food, ammunition and weapons. However, he then began planning a large-scale invasion of the Russian Altai and Baikal regions to the north. In that campaign he sought an alliance with Outer Mongolia. He counted on rebellions in Siberia by local tribespeople and Russian peasants. Preparing for the operation, Bakich inexplicably seized 2,500 Mongol-owned horses, a theft that completely changed the previously friendly Mongolian attitude toward him. From then on, Mongol leaders sought an alliance with the Bolsheviks. By that time von Shternberg had been captured by the Soviets, who tried and executed him on 15 September 1921. The Soviets then reinforced their domination over Outer Mongolia by creating the Mongolian Communist Party and Red Army commanded by Suchar Bator (Kondratov 2008, p. 196; Roshchin 2005; Zhurkovskya & Pyurveev 2006).

In the autumn of 1921 Bakich launched his ill-fated military incursion into Soviet Russia. As planned, he went north and entered the Baikal region, only to be defeated by the Red Army later that year.⁷³ He had to retreat back into Outer Mongolia, where he and his depleted forces, lacking food, ammunition and weapons, bowed to the inevitable and surrendered to Mongol forces in February 1922. Contrary to his expectations of safety, his former ‘friends’ handed him over to the Bolsheviks, who

⁷²AVP RF, op. 1, d. 1, pap. 101, 1919–21, Telegram, Tashkent, 17 May 1921, and subsequent reply from Karakhan, 20 May 1921. See also GANO, op. 2, d. 43, p. 21, in Malisheva and Poznanskii (1996).

⁷³RGVIA, f. 28105, op. 1, d. 404, 1922.

returned him to Russia, where he was tried and executed in May 1922. (As with Dutov and Annenkov, post-Soviet Russia has fully rehabilitated Bakich. The Red Army's operations against Bakich's forces in Xinjiang arguably represented one of the last battles of the Russian Civil War.)

The rebellion led Chinese provincial authorities to take a much tougher line toward the Whites. Commanders had to find other kinds of work, and some Cossack horsemen opened blacksmith workshops, while others rented hay meadows where they could raise horses. The Soviet authorities claimed that most White refugees sought to return to Russia, but feared doing so due to anti-Soviet propaganda. With little prospect of launching any offensive operations, White commanders increasingly feuded with each other, as when the jealous General Samoilov led an uncompromising struggle against General Schebarkov, who was very popular among his fellow officers and men, and had assumed the mantle of supreme White Commander in Xinjiang. Samoilov persuaded Chinese provincial authorities in Urumchi that Schebarkov was a threat, accused him of being a Soviet spy, and subsequently arrested him. Schebarkov saved his life by slandering General Dutov, weakening his position at a time when Dutov sought to unify the Whites.⁷⁴ Borchak, the Bolshevik agent in Ghulja, intensely disliked Dutov, and *vice versa*. Determined to destroy Dutov's influence and his attempts to launch a military operation in the near future, Borchak helped to arrange his murder in February 1921.⁷⁵ Two Uyghur assassins slipped into Dutov's encampment at Suidin and murdered him (Ganin 2006, pp. 502–3). Thereafter, the White organisation, deprived of its able and popular leader, disintegrated. The assassination assured the predominance of the Bolsheviks throughout the Ili region, a situation that would continue until Sino–Soviet relations collapsed in the early 1960s.

Fighting between Red Army forces and the Whites also caused widespread destruction during the summer of 1921 in Chughuchaq, the major town in the region. Once the Bolsheviks gained control of Chughuchaq, they seized some 2,000 White soldiers, refugees and their property, levying huge taxes on all Russian residents in the area.⁷⁶ From that point on, the Bolsheviks retained control of that region. At the same time Comintern agents conducted revolutionary propaganda among demoralised, impoverished and hungry White soldiers. The British conceded that by 1922 Ghulja had become a very Russian town. By that time the entire population, including Russians, in the Ili district was reduced to such a state of poverty that 'their garments were woven from grass, and people ate sawdust to stave off hunger pains. The dead were covered only by grass'.⁷⁷ Report after report described the almost daily growth in Russian power and influence. While the British detested the Bolsheviks, they conceded that they were popular throughout the district. One 1922 Foreign Office report mentioned that 50% of the population favoured the Bolsheviks, particularly as they

⁷⁴RGVIA, f. 28105, op. 1, d. 404, 1922, *Informatsiya o belykh organizatsiyakh na Kitaiskoi territorii* [Information about White Organisations on Chinese Territory].

⁷⁵PRO, FO 371/8029, 1922, 'Political Situation in Ili'.

⁷⁶PRO, FO 371/6625, 1921, 'Kashgar Diary', May–July 1921.

⁷⁷PRO, FO 371/6625, April 1922. For a Soviet account of British activities in Kashgar, note AVP RF, f. 0100v (*Ref po Sintsin*), op. 2, d. 2, pap. 101, 1920–21, *Sovremennaya situatsiya v Kashgare* [Contemporary Situation in Kashgar].

were seen as an alternative to the Chinese, whom the Kazak population considered completely incompetent and corrupt.⁷⁸

Yet Soviet Russian officials demonstrated real reservations as to just how substantial a presence they should maintain in Xinjiang. In mid-1921 Governor Yang asked them to continue their military operations against the Whites. The Russian diplomats responded they would do so only if they would in return be allowed to set up a trade office in the Xinjiang capital, Urumchi. Significantly, by demanding that the Xinjiang government itself recognise Soviet Russia, the Bolsheviks in turn treated Xinjiang as a state able to conduct its own foreign policy, independently of China. They then stated:

We should accept the Chinese offer only if we are sure we can defeat the Whites. If we fail, the Chinese would use our presence as a pretext to re-establish harsh Chinese rule in Xinjiang as well as accuse us of Imperialism. We should withdraw when our task is completed.⁷⁹

Furthermore, Soviet diplomats feared that a continued occupation could provoke an anti-Chinese rebellion by Uyghurs: 'Any creation of Muslim republics for us would be very bad. We must establish contacts with tribal leaders to prevent rebellion'.⁸⁰ People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, Georgi Chicherin, agreed that a Uyghur uprising must at all costs be prevented. Soviet officials believed the Chinese would crush an uprising. At the same time, however, almost all Soviet representatives in Xinjiang were personally sympathetic to the Uyghurs, and conceded that Xinjiang was caught in the grip of a repressive campaign of terror engineered by the Chinese against tribespeople. This is the first written evidence that representatives of Soviet Russia sympathised with the plight of the Uyghurs, but at the same time they refused to irritate China. Good relations with China took primacy—pragmatism over ideology, reason over emotion. They recognised that the Whites effectively exploited anti-Chinese feelings, as in the Oirat (Kalmuk) uprising in Urumchi. Thus, Soviet foreign policy toward both the Chinese authorities and tribespeople was contradictory, with some policy makers, particularly revolutionary agents, sympathetic to the Uyghurs and other minorities in their goal of separating from China, while others, largely diplomats, sought good political, economic and military relations with the Chinese.⁸¹

British suspicions of Soviet activities in Xinjiang nonetheless had some justification. When they sent troops into Xinjiang, Russia effectively sought an alliance with China against a much larger, distant, and more significant target: British-ruled India. Since Bakich's forces had degenerated into total banditry—terrorising, stealing and even killing villagers—the Soviet leadership believed that crushing these White forces would ingratiate Moscow with Beiping (Beijing), which might lead both new nations into a broader military and political alliance. A leading Foreign Commissariat official declared that another operation against the Whites would be useful as the Chinese

⁷⁸PRO, FO 371/80006, 1922, 'Kashgar Diary', May 1922.

⁷⁹AVP RF, f. 0100v, op. 1, d. 1, pap. 101, 1919–21, To Moscow, Chicherin, from Zuckerman, Vice Director, Narkomindel, Tashkent, 15 June 1921.

⁸⁰AVP RF, f. 0100v, op. 1, d. 1, pap. 101, 1921, Telegram to Danilov, HQ, Red Army, from Zuckerman, Tashkent, 10 August 1921.

⁸¹AVP RF, f. 0100v, op. 1, d. 1, pap. 101, 1921, Telegram, Barzhak, *Otdel mezhdunarodnykh otnoshenii* [International Relations Department], Kuldja, 21 July 1921.

would then feel grateful and might in return grant Russia concessions. Success would win popularity for the new Soviet state in Xinjiang, expanding its influence throughout the province: 'If we destroy these Whites, we will be masters in Xinjiang, and could gain influence in India and Tibet'.⁸² The Soviet leadership hoped Beijing would then agree to launch an anti-British joint military expedition with the ultimate goal of ousting the British from India. Since the Peoples Commissariat of Foreign Affairs was sceptical that China would accept the presence of Soviet troops and influence in Xinjiang, Soviet representatives threatened that, should the Chinese refuse to accept their military assistance, they would foster separatism.⁸³ That expedition, therefore, on this little known front, could easily have precipitated a major war between China and Soviet Russia, and might even have had the potential to provoke conflict between those two states and Britain.⁸⁴

Yet, as the *Narkomindel* conceded, the Chinese were still fearful of a permanent Soviet Russian presence in Xinjiang. When the Red Army helped Xinjiang crush the Whites in 1921, in return Governor Yang promised to allow Soviet representation in Xinjiang. The Governor of Xinjiang declared:

With the permission of the central government, we are ready to welcome the representatives of the great Soviet Russia for Urumchi, Xinjiang, with whom we are ready to have further negotiations about political and economic relations. I ask you Soviets to appoint Mr. Voronin as your representative.⁸⁵

When the task was accomplished, however, Yang lost interest and broke his promise.⁸⁶ The Bolsheviks would only reopen the consulates in their original premises after they established full diplomatic relations with all of China on 6 October 1924.⁸⁷ At the same time, the Xinjiang government acted as though it were a sovereign government. In 1924, the Governor personally sent condolences on behalf of his government to Foreign Commissar Chicherin upon 'the early death of the great leader, genius, and scientist V. I. Lenin'.⁸⁸ Later that year the Xinjiang Governor personally congratulated the Soviet Consul-General on celebrating the seventh anniversary of the October 1917 Revolution.⁸⁹

⁸²AVP RF, f. 0100v, E. Nenchenko, Tashkent, 4 July 1921, p. 116.

⁸³AVP RF, f. 0100v, Filippov, *Zamestitel nachalnika informatsionnogo otdela* [*Deputy Head of Information Department*], OVC, Tashkent, *Doklad Chicherinu i Trotskomu* [*Report to Chicherin and Trotsky*], 23 November 1921.

⁸⁴This perspective on the wider Soviet ambitions runs counter to Millward's interpretation, that the sole purpose of Soviet military intervention was to crush one of the last remaining organised White forces and definitely end the Civil War in that region (Millward 2007, pp. 185–86).

⁸⁵AVP RF, f. 0100v (*Ref-ra po Sintszyan*), op. 4, d. 10, pap. 102, 1922, Urumchi Governor, Telegram, 18 August 1921.

⁸⁶AVP RF, f. 0100v (*Ref-ra po Sintszyan*), op. 4, d. 5, pap. 102, 1921–22, 'Urumchi Negotiations', October 1922, N. E. Palkkaitis, Tashkent, *Informatsionnyi otdel* [*Information Department*].

⁸⁷RGASPI, f. 532, op. 4, d. 328, Rostovsky, *Sintszyan v vek kapitalisticheskogo krizisa* [*Xinjiang in the Age of Capitalist Crisis, Bolshevik Revolution in Xinjiang*], unpublished manuscript.

⁸⁸AVP RF, f. 0100v, op. 4, d. 2, pap. 1, January 1924, Telegram to Chicherin, Narkomindel, Moscow, from Iili, 31 January 1924.

⁸⁹AVP RF, f. 0100v, op. 4, d. 2, pap. 1, Telegram to Zuckerman, Foreign Ministry, Moscow from Horos, Pechatnikov, 11 November 1924.

By the end of the Civil War in 1921, Xinjiang's Russian community had roughly doubled in size, to 60,000. In a sparsely populated province of 2.8 million it constituted a significant minority, and one far larger and more influential than the figures would indicate, as the Russian community was located mostly in cities and towns along the Russian Turkestan border. It was very different from the Russian community prior to 1917, a mere four years earlier, which had consisted mostly of diplomatic personnel and their families, together with merchants and their families. The 30,000 émigrés were very much a cross-section of old Russian society: nobility, professionals, intellectuals, ordinary middle class, peasants, Cossack soldiers and officers, ordinary soldiers and officers, and other religious and ethnic minorities, such as Jews and Old Believers. All either saw no future in a socialist Russia, especially members of the nobility, intelligentsia and middle class, or had fled the fighting, which had ravaged their towns, villages and farms, or they sought a better life outside of Russia, as with Old Believers, Jews, Muslim Uyghurs and Kazaks (Blagovo & Sapozhnikova 2005). The most pro-Bolshevik among the refugees were Kazak tribesmen who had fled the repressions following the failure of the 1916 uprising, and obviously had no love for White Cossack cavalry officers who had destroyed their villages and families. Regardless of their feelings toward the new Soviet Russian regime, all were collectively termed 'White Russians'.

When the former Imperial consulates were open, they had tried to ameliorate conditions among these refugees, distributing what funds they could from the rapidly dwindling resources inflation left them, so that the refugees could purchase basics such as clothing, food, water and shelter. After the Imperial Russian consulates closed in Xinjiang in October 1920, a Russian trading society, headed by Dyukovich, former Director of the Russian-Asian Bank, was soon founded to assist these thousands of refugees. Comintern files claimed that Dyukovich forced the desperate refugees to join the trading society, in return for 15% of their meagre earnings.⁹⁰ During the bitterly cold and snowy winters, people literally died from cold and hunger. While economically desperately poor, many White Russians, especially those from the former upper and middle classes, were well educated and possessed many skills valuable to Xinjiang, which needed to rebuild after years of war and revolution and then to undertake modernisation. To avoid potential deportation, many White Russians took up Chinese nationality, while others remained stateless. Soviet Comintern agents killed most of the White leadership, eliminating any remaining danger of a White invasion of Soviet territory. While some refugees knew only how to make war and essentially became bandits, most White Russians settled peacefully in Xinjiang, some of them becoming farmers, tradesmen and teachers. They were allowed a good deal of freedom, as Xinjiang needed their technical skills.⁹¹

⁹⁰RGASPI, f. 544, op. 4, d. 36, February 1921-June 1922, *Doklad [Report]* by Comintern agent, Shamud.

⁹¹While most were initially anti-communist, as trade increased over time between Soviet Central Asia and Xinjiang, growing numbers of the refugees became pro-Soviet. During the Dungan Muslim rebellion in 1931-1933, China created a 1,000-man regiment composed of former cavalymen from Annenkov's and Dutov's detachments. Those White troops, which by then had full Soviet political support, played a crucial role in suppressing the anti-Chinese rebellion (Blagovo & Sapozhnikova 2005).

Conclusions

While the Xinjiang front in the Russian Civil War has been little known and explored, this front impacted significantly on both Xinjiang and the Soviet Union. First, the Russian Revolution and Civil War proved catastrophic for Xinjiang's already primitive economy, which depended on Russian trade and products. Everyday necessities, such as kerosene, matches, candles, sugar, bread, meat, paper, clothing and shoes, became impossible to find in stores or in markets when the border closed. Only contraband made it across the border, at increased prices due to widespread bribes demanded by the border guards. Without food, tens of thousands of people starved to death, while many others died of cold because they lacked clothing, shoes or shelter. All the ingredients of a severe economic depression were present in Xinjiang—widespread poverty, unemployment, famine, disease and destruction. Only when large-scale trade resumed following the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and China in 1924, as well as the end of the Civil War itself, did hunger and even famine throughout large areas of Xinjiang cease. However, once the border officially reopened, legal trade between Soviet Central Asia and Xinjiang only slowly resumed. Soviet officials were hesitant about trading with the British, who filled the vacuum and now played a prominent role in Kashgar's economic life, as well as with the Chinese.⁹² Over time, however, trade resumed and soon greatly surpassed its pre-World War I level.

Secondly, the Civil War almost embroiled the new Soviet Russia in a war with the new Republic of China. Undoubtedly, a proud new nationalistic regime was unlikely to tolerate for long foreign armies invading its territory, destroying property and killing people, including Chinese troops and civilians. In the 1921 invasion, the Xinjiang government, acting in the name of the Chinese Republican government, certainly approved the incursion, in order to destroy a White Army that had degenerated into banditry. Had Russian forces remained indefinitely in Xinjiang, however, at some point China would have fought back hard, resulting in a full-scale war with potentially huge consequences. White Russian forces, which launched raids from Xinjiang into the Semirech'ye, certainly prolonged the campaign in that region and forced the Bolsheviks to divert resources there;⁹³ yet newly declassified documents reveal the real Soviet goal was a political and military alliance with China, which they believed would lead to a joint military expedition to liberate India, thereby causing a major defeat for Great Britain, the enemy of both states.⁹⁴

The ending of the Russian Civil War's Xinjiang front in 1921 did not mark the end of the Russian Civil War overall, as there were a few subsequent campaigns; yet the Xinjiang front was one of the last in which organised, largely ethnic Russian,

⁹²RGAE, f. 413, op. 14, d. 286, 1924–25, N. V. Tverutina, *Rabota v Kul'dzhinskoi regione* [*Work in the Kuldinskaya Region*], 3 December 1924.

⁹³RGVIA, f. 25859, op. 4, d. 8, 1918–19, *Okhrana granitsy i voennye posty: Kazakhsko-Simtszyanskaya granitsa* [*Border Protection and Military Posts: Kazak–Xinjiang Report Frontier*], *Doklad* [*Report*] by Special Official from the Commissariat of Internal Affairs, M. S. Popov.

⁹⁴AVP RF, f. 0100v, op. 4, d. 5, pap. 102, 1921–22, *Doklad* [*Report*], A. Iu. Goperu, Turkestan, Author, Epstein, Special Official in Xinjiang, Urumchi, 14 March 1922.

anti-communist White forces confronted similarly largely ethnic Russian, communist Red Army detachments. Other campaigns, which some authors have cited as integral parts of the Civil War, such as White Colonel Anatolii's Papelev's expedition in Siberia's Yakutiya region, those in Central Asia and in the Caucasus, were campaigns in which Red Army forces quelled the aspirations of non-Russian peoples for independence (Ablazhei 2003, pp. 47–58). By 1922, for example, Red Army forces had crushed most organised Bashmachi resistance, a long-standing Pan-Turkic Islamist movement, in the lush and deeply religious Fergana Valley in Uzbekistan (Shumov & Andreev 2005). Many émigrés from a strongly anti-Bolshevik ethnic group, the Naiment, who lost everything in the Civil War, whereupon many of its leaders fled to Xinjiang, were central in organising the Bashmachi resistance movement.⁹⁵

The Xinjiang front was outside the territory of the former Russian empire and the later Soviet Union. Both Tsarist and communist governments recognised that Xinjiang was an integral part of China. Communist forces entered Xinjiang only when they received a formal invitation from the Chinese. The Xinjiang front served as a diversionary front for international Bolshevik enemies, Great Britain and Japan, both of which sent funds and weapons so that the Whites could raise armies to attack Bolshevik forces or launch raids on Bolshevik-held territory. The British were active in Southern Xinjiang in Kashgar, near India, while the Japanese were active in the northern and eastern regions bordering on Outer Mongolia, another front in the Russian Civil War, which ran along thousands of miles of steppes, mountains, rivers and deserts, from the Caspian Sea and Central Asia to the Pacific coast city of Vladivostok. As in other fronts of the Russian Civil War, foreign intervention played a significant role in Xinjiang as White commanders, such as Dutov and Bakich, appealed for Japanese, British or any other assistance as their situations became increasingly precarious in 1920 and 1921, particularly during the long cold winter of late 1920 and early 1921.

Thirdly, the Xinjiang government was unhappy that foreign Comintern agents on its soil were urging its poor peasants and workers to rebel against its rule. China was particularly upset when Soviet Comintern agents propagandised among Xinjiang's non-Chinese Uyghur majority, urging its people to rise up against Chinese domination to establish an independent Uyghurstan. Kazanskii, a Soviet Russian official, admitted as much in a report to Moscow, writing that the main goal of negotiations was not really trade, but to conduct revolutionary agitation among Muslims: 'The Soviet goal was to take control of Urumchi; negotiations were just a cover. My purpose has been to "delay negotiations", but to do so that the Chinese could not see it'.⁹⁶ In all probability, what prevented a war from erupting between China and Soviet Russia was that both new revolutionary governments understood the huge consequences of such a conflict, a fact that Ambassador Leonid Karakhan understood when he wrote

⁹⁵AVP RF, f. 0100v, op. 16, d. 10, pap. 148, 1934, *Doklad i pis'ma* [Reports and Letters], Soviet Consul, Sarasume, 26 May 1934.

⁹⁶AVP RF, f. 0100v, op. 4, d. 10, pap. 102, 1922, Urumchi, *Doklad Kazanskogo o ego deyatel'nosti v Alma Ate, Khuldzha, i Urumchi* [Report by Kazanskii on his Activities in Alma Ata, Ghulja, and Urumchi], 22 September 1921–1 September 1922.

to Moscow that as soon as the White Army was defeated, Soviet forces would immediately have to withdraw from Xinjiang.⁹⁷

Soviet leaders sought good relations with the new nationalistic China and its leader Sun Yat-sen, with whom they were on friendly terms. Comintern activity, often conducted independently of the *Narkomindel*, was nevertheless an early example of Soviet relations with a non-Russian Empire minority group, namely the Uyghurs, who dominated Xinjiang and looked to Soviet Russia as a force that might liberate them from Chinese rule, whose corruption and incompetence had made it extremely unpopular. Significantly, moreover, the new Soviet state negotiated and made treaties with Xinjiang as though it were a sovereign state. The government of Xinjiang, in turn, also behaved as though it was independent, as its Foreign Ministry sent condolences to Moscow upon the death of Lenin in January 1924, and later that year, congratulations for the seventh anniversary of the October 1917 Revolution.

Finally, the Russian Civil War in Xinjiang was a genuine military front with battles and casualties, but a front within Xinjiang, which became a battleground for competing Russian factions. The resulting death and destruction made Chinese nationalists determined to consolidate and strengthen their control and rule over Xinjiang. The once strong Russian presence in Xinjiang was temporarily weakened due to Russian preoccupation with their own problems, offering Xinjiang opportunities to centralise its provincial government. Russian interests in the region went back hundreds of years. The Tsarist government dominated Xinjiang's economic life. To some extent the domination was exploitative, to some extent it was benevolent. It was exploitative in a ruthless, largely successful campaign to keep out foreign competition—China and Great Britain. The Russians were the only significant modernising force, and their influence was benevolent in that the Russians genuinely believed they were improving conditions in Xinjiang. The ramifications of the Russian Civil War within Xinjiang therefore had important impacts on the people of Xinjiang, including the large Russian community, on Russian–Chinese relations, and on Russia and China themselves.

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⁹⁷AVP RF, f. 0100v, (*Ref—ra po Sintszyan*), op. 1, d. 1, pap. 101, 1919–21, Reply from Karakhan, 20 May 1921.

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