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## **The Revolt of Three Kazakh Districts (Ili, Altai, Tarbaghatai) against Chinese rule in Xinjiang: A Cold War Prologue (1944-1949)**

### *Abstract:*

The article argues that the first military operation of the Cold War occurred in three provinces, populated mostly by Kazaks, in Xinjiang (northwest China): Ili, Tarbaghatai, and Altai between 1944 – 1949. The uprising, known as the Three Districts Revolution, was between the Soviet-backed East Turkestan Republic (ETR) and the Kuomintang authorities supported by the US. In 1947, a leader of the liberation movement, Ospan Batyr, changed political allegiance to Kuomintang and began fighting the East Turkestan Republic reflecting the changing struggle between the two sides. The article outlines the competition between the United States and the Soviet Union, resulting in clashes between the Kazakh groups of Ospan batyr and Dalelhan Sugirbayev, the fight for land containing tungsten mines, the Peitashang incident, which almost started World War III, and a mysterious plane crash, which killed most members of the East Turkestan Republic government and coincided with the testing of the first Soviet atomic bomb.

*Keywords:*

Ospan Batyr, the Kazaks, the East Turkestan, the ETR, the Cold War.

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## **Восстание трёх казахских районов (Или, Алтай, Тарбагатай) против китайского правления в Синьцзяне: Пролог холодной войны (1944-1949)**

*Аннотация:*

В статье утверждается, что первая военная операция холодной войны произошла в трёх провинциях Синьцзяна (Северо-западный Китай), населённых, в основном, казахами, Или, Тарбагатай и Алтай в период с 1944 по 1949 годы. Восстание, известное как Революция трёх районов, произошло между поддерживаемой Советами Республикой Восточный Туркестан и властями Гоминьдана, поддерживаемыми США. В 1947 году лидер освободительного движения Оспан Батыр изменил политическую приверженность Гоминьдану и начал борьбу с Республикой Восточный Туркестан, отражая меняющуюся борьбу между двумя сторонами. В статье рассказывается о соперничестве между Соединёнными Штатами и Советским Союзом, приведшем к столкновениям между казахскими группировками Оспан батыра и Далелхана Сугирбаева, борьбе за земли, содержащие вольфрамовые рудники, инциденту в Пейташанге, из-за которого едва не началась Третья мировая война, и загадочной авиакатастрофе, в которой погибло большинство членов правительства Республики Восточный Туркестан и совпало с испытанием первой советской атомной бомбы.

*Ключевые слова:*

Оспан батыр, казахи, Республика Восточный Туркестан, холодная война.

### **Abbreviations:**

CIA – Central Intelligence Agency

ETR – East Turkestan Republic

KGB, or SSC – State Security Committee of the USSR

MPR – Mongolian People’s Republic,

PR China – People’s Republic of China

US – United States of America

USSR – United Soviet Socialist Republic

### **Introduction**

The Cold War was a tense period in world history. During this time the world witnessed some major international crises, such as the Berlin crisis, the Caribbean crisis, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Afghan War and others. The Cold War went far beyond the military plane, touching upon different aspects of life: culture, sports, science, etc. But in all its manifestations the competition between the two rivals – the USSR and the US – was evident. For example, in the war between North Korea and South Korea, the USSR and China supported North Korea, and the US and its allies upheld South Korea. In the war in Vietnam, the US and its allies (SEATO) supported South Vietnam, and the USSR and PR China supported North Vietnam.

There were also other events in which the same features can be seen. One of these was the little-known revolution of three districts occurring in 1944 in Xinjiang, China’s northwest province, which is now bordered by seven countries: Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. In the 1940s, Xinjiang was divided into ten districts, three of which were Kazakh (Ili, Altai and Tarbaghatai). In this Kazakh territory, under the support of the Soviet Union, the East Turkestan Republic was proclaimed. The Kazakh rebels fought against the Kuomintang, the then-ruling party of China supported by the US. By 1947, the competition between the USSR and the US had a significantly more complex structure, affecting the relations between the rebels: the revolutionary republic and Kazakh leader Ospan Islamuli, supported by the Kuomintang, had to fight for existence. Ospan’s transition from the support of the East Turkestan Republic to the Kuomintang in the winter of 1946-1947 intensified the fight between the major powers for Xinjiang and the growth of the region’s significance in the emerging

bipolar world. In this competition, it was necessary to fight not only for armies and republics, but for or against separate leaders, especially such an extraordinary and controversial personality as Ospan. Thus, even before the war in Korea, the interests of the USSR and the US converged in the fight for Xinjiang. In the Xinjiang steppes and mountains, the features of the emerging Cold War began to appear. By the end of the Second World War, Xinjiang, which is bordered by Mongolia, the USSR, Afghanistan and India, had become one of the first points in which the interests of the USSR, the US, Germany, France, Japan, the UK, Sweden and other countries collided.

In contrast to the rest of the territory of China (Xinjiang was annexed by the Qing Empire later and appeared to be separated from it by the great Wall of China), the history of Xinjiang and its special location in the heart of the Eurasian continent predetermined its fate as a training ground on which the would-be competitors developed their fighting techniques.

In 1944 Xinjiang was almost single-handedly ruled by the dictator Shen Shicai. Xinjiang existed virtually separately from the rest of China. Strong ethnic and cultural differences between the population of Xinjiang and that of the rest of China sharpened the contrast. The predominantly Turkic Moslem population were living miserable lives, being suppressed by Chinese authorities. Sheng raised taxes and aggravated the economic and ethnic situation. After the armed attack of fascist Germany on the Soviet Union, Shen, considering the fate of the USSR in the war predetermined, dramatically changed his political course, directing it from the USSR to the West. In Xinjiang Soviet embassies were closed, diplomats and staff were deported, and different anti-Soviet sanctions were introduced. As a result, the economy of Xinjiang, closely connected with the USSR, suffered great losses. The population's standard of life decreased. Hard living conditions strengthened resentment and anti-government armed protests grew in frequency. In November 1944 the rebels overthrew the Kuomintang power and proclaimed the independent East Turkestan Republic, which existed for a brief five years.

However, speaking about the ETR, one should never forget its proximity to the USSR. The Soviet Union could not remain indifferent to the actions of Shen on the near-frontier territory, especially during war time. One also should not disregard the fact that during the war fascists tried to recruit the anti-Soviet Turkestan legion in the territory of Xinjiang. The creation and implementation of the world's first atomic bomb by the US, which secured it the leading position in weaponry, probably became

a turning point in the history of Kazakhs, Uighurs and others nations of Xinjiang as well. During the period of 1945-1949, the US worked out three strategic plans of attack on the USSR. According to the No. 329 plan of the Joint Intelligence Committee (Ross, 1996). 20 targets were to be affected by nuclear strikes. The No. 432/D plan presupposed “the use of all 196 atomic bombs at the disposal of the USA to strike major industrial centers of the USSR.” The “Dropshot” plan presupposed 300 nuclear strikes on the USSR, the destruction of the USSR and the occupation of the Soviet territory with the aim of complete “eradication of the Soviet system” (Draft resolutions of the Central Committee of the CPSU (b). RSA of S&PH. Fond 82. Inventory 2. Case 1260. Sheet 78).

The Soviet Union began to develop a range of responses, including Shen Shicai’s removal from power. The USSR badly needed its own A-bomb. But to produce it large amounts of uranium were necessary. Uranium was discovered, along with oil and other natural resources, in the territory of Xinjiang.

It is worth considering the interests of the Soviet Union in the subsoil of Xinjiang in more detail. Even prior to the discovery of uranium, Soviet geologists reported that “coal reserves in the Ili district amount to a few billion tons, besides, large coal reserves are situated in the district of Urumqi, in Shiho and Manas; in Altysnar – in Kashgar, Aksu, Kuchar and Keriya (Articles about the economic, political, situation of Xinjiang). Xinjiang was so rich in coal deposits that in some areas, for example, in the district of Tarbaghatai and in the Ukashar Mountains, they were located directly on the earth’s surface. However, at that time the mining industry was not highly developed in Xinjiang. For example, in Kulja the extraction of coal was carried out “only in the winter and in the most primitive way” and amounted to 75,000 tons of coal per year. The Soviet experts calculated that “if to organize right modern coal mining methods and regularize the process, it would be possible to bring to the Soviet Republic down the Ili River millions of tons of good coal.” Xinjiang also possessed deposits of other mineral resources, “deposits of gold, silver, iron, copper, lead and other metals, which were extracted by the population in the most primitive ways.” According to the data of the Soviet document “Stat’i ob ekonomicheskoy, politicheskoy polozhenii Sin’tszyana” (“Articles on the Economic and Political Situation in Xinjiang”), there was copper in the Ili district; black lead in the district of the Lake Lop Nor; gold in Yarkand, Hotan, Keriya, and Manas on the Altai; and silver in the Guchenskoye, Borohorskoye and Kirieskoye areas. In this document, Soviet

experts predicted the discovery of other mineral resources, “the finding of which may be determined by research workers and experts” and concluded logically that “Xinjiang subsoils are waiting for these workers.” (Articles about the economic, political, situation of Xinjiang)

The US in its turn also arranged geological expeditions to Xinjiang, (for example, the Roosevelt brothers’ expedition and the Morden and Clark expedition in 1925 (Rostovskiy). But the work of Western and Soviet intelligence agencies in Xinjiang was affected by poor communication networks and remoteness of the province from the capital. However, Soviet intelligence agencies were very successful: political clubs were organized, spy networks were enlarged and the number of party branches was increased. In the discontented whispers of Xinjiang masses, such words as “revolution,” “the Party,” and “Marx” were heard more and more often. There were those who had some idea of Marxism-Leninism and single-handedly led the propaganda (Documentary material about Communist cadres in Xinjiang).

Naturally, the US could not allow the expansion of its potential rival’s influence zone. To counter the Soviet interests, three American government officials were sent to Xinjiang. First, Consul Oliver Edmund Clubb was sent to Xinjiang in April of 1943. In the Soviet Union he was known as an “authoritative orientalist” and as “an experienced intelligence officer, specializing in the activities against the USSR” (Barmin, 2013). Second, John Hall Paxton was the American Consul during the period of 1946-1949. Clubb and Paxton suspected the existence of uranium reserves in Xinjiang as early as 1943, and one of their main tasks was the obstruction of the Soviet Union access to Xinjiang uranium. Also, according to Yitzhak Shichor, Xinjiang interested Washington as a military air base in case of a Third World War (Shichor, 2004).

Douglas MacKiernan was Paxton’s deputy, as well as a CIA agent, who monitored the situation in Xinjiang and the Soviet presence there. Probably, he (MacKiernan) was involved in providing the nomads’ loyalty to the US in case of a Third World War (Jacobs, 2016). Mackiernan was once called the “American man in Urumqi” and awarded the first star on the CIA’s Wall of Honor.

### **1. Revolution. On the way to the Republic**

On November, 7, 1944, an uprising started in Kulja, the administrative center of the Ili district of Xinjiang. Machine-gun fire from the Soviet Consulate served as a

starting signal for the beginning of the action. The rebels killed Liu Bin-Di, sent by the Kuomintang for prevention of disorder. In this way the Ili uprising started. The date of the rebellion bears symbolic significance: November 7 was the day of the October Revolution celebration in the Soviet Union (Barmin, 2005). This coincidence subsequently gave rise to many disputes.

However, the rebels had many more connections with the Soviet Union than just a date. The Soviet Union sent necessary military instructors, equipment, staff and supplies to the rebels, providing them with “aid and comfort” (Foreign Relations of the United States, 1947). Weapons supplies contributed to the quick victory of the rebels over government forces in the Ili Valley and encouraged the rebellion (Benson & Svanberg, 1988; Wang, 1993). The Soviet Union gave the rebels the “green light” (Brophy, 2016). Fugitives from Xinjiang were trained in the Soviet Union; they were armed, arranged into divisions and sent back to Xinjiang to control the uprising, “The rebels gathered supporters, including a unit of escapees from Xinjiang who had been trained, armed and repatriated by the Soviet Union to coordinate the rebellion.” (Millward, 2007) Among the rebels were soldiers of the Soviet regular army in the Soviet military uniform, with a few dozen aircraft and a large consignment of artillery guns under the command of General Consul Kozlov. The use of Soviet aircraft during the rebellion is also confirmed by Millward. On the whole, the uprising was well planned in a “Soviet manner” (Barmin, 2005). At the same time, Makhsum, one of the members of the ETR government, recalls that the Soviet Union did not render any significant support in the beginning of the uprising and joined the rebels only when their success was evident. The USSR provided weapons in exchange for sheep and only did this in the beginning. Then the rebels started taking the weapons from their adversary. Makhsum also says that when Abdukerim Abbasov appealed to the Soviet Union for help, he returned with a group of approximately 40 Uyghur, Russian and Kazakh partisans, who had resided in Kulja. That group, led by a Russian leader, whose name was Piotr Romanovich Alexandrov, was not well armed and was not sufficient to render significant support to insurgents in the war against the Kuomintang forces. The Soviets took initiative only after the rebellion started. Makhsum recalls that the Soviet generals V.S. Kozlov and I. Polinov arrived in Kulja after the rebellion broke up and took initiative in organizing rebel military actions. They commanded further military actions of the ETR National Army, which was organized on April 8, 1945 (Kamalov et al., 2010).

With the participation of the Soviet army, the rebels managed to occupy several cities and air bases. Former White Guards and local Russians also supported the rebels.

## **2. The East Turkestan Republic**

Soon Alikhan Tora, “an Islamic scholar and charismatic orator,” as he was called by Millward, proclaimed Turkestan Islamic government. The East Turkestan Republic, established as a result of the revolution, is considered a pro-Soviet formation. Its national flag was a green cloth with a five-pointed Soviet-style red star, with yellow crescents in the center (Badavamov, 1967). The military insignia of the new Republic was also similar to the Soviet.

The government of the new Republic consisted of members of the Liberation Organization (*Azatliq Tashkilat*), established by Consul Dubashin, the so-called “12 brothers” (Kayirken, 2008). Before that, many future ETR leaders studied or worked in the USSR at different times, which explained their support or at least sympathy towards communism. The decision making of the ETR leaders (A. Abbasov, A. Qasimi, D. Sugirbaev) was influenced by the instructions from the Soviet Union, due to the fact that “some of them had lived long enough in the Soviet Union, were members of the All-Russia Communist Party (b) and, therefore, often simply had to follow the instructions from Moscow” (Barmin, 2005).

Soviet agents or those affiliated with the Soviet Union include Abdulkerim Abbas, Ishaq Beg, Saifutdin Azizi and the White Guard Russians F. Leskin, A. Polinov, and Glimkin (Forbes, 1986). Given that Abbas was the Head of the Propaganda Department, one had to wonder in what direction his propaganda would lead.

In December 1944, the arrival of Soviet Generals in the ETR ended a “partisan stage,” after which “the whole fate of Eastern Turkistan rebellion fell into the hands of the Soviets.” The further actions of the ETR were controlled by the Soviets’ “Second House,” headquarters of the Soviet military advisors. Makhsum calls Dubashin sarcastically “our imam”, “Thus, since that time Dubashin became our “imam” supervisor, we depended on him, and fulfilled what he said” (Kamalov et al., 2010).

Orders and awards represent a very interesting and insufficiently explored resource concerning the history of the ETR. Consider, e.g., the Order of the “Struggle



for Independence,” the 1st and 2nd degrees. The Order was made in the form of a five-pointed star (Soviet symbols). “On the front side in the central circular medallion of a five-pointed star with strahl is a small five-pointed star and crescent.” The harmonious combination of Soviet (five-pointed star) and Moslem (star and crescent) symbols is worth noting. But the inner star on the Order is much larger than the star next to the crescent in Islamic symbolism, and lies to the left and not to the right of the crescent, as is usual. The size of the star on the Order as well as on other Orders, those of “Freedom” and “For Bravery,” probably shows the importance of the Soviet regime in the ETR. One more significant detail is represented by signatures in the award documentation. For example, Tayyip Haji Sabitov was awarded the order “Struggle for Independence” of the 2nd degree in July 1945, and that of the 1st degree on June 18, 1946. The first document was signed by Alikhan Tora and by his Deputy Hakimbek Khoja, the second one, only by Hakimbek. Seals on the first document were only in the Uighur language, and on the second one in the Uighur and Russian languages, which testifies to the strengthening of the Soviet component in the government of the ETR (Kamalov et al., 2010; Badavamov, 1967).

These orders reflected the increasing strength of the Soviet presence in the ETR in the summer of 1946. The ETR army was under the command of Ishak Beg, who worked for the Soviets. That summer, Soviet military forces entered the ETR, reinforcing their power over the republic and arranging “a purge” of unreliable elements (Badavamov, 1967). Exactly who was purged and who were those “unreliable elements” can be more clearly understood when the indifferent reaction of the Uighurs and other nations to these events is examined (Brophy, 2016).

Already by that summer Alikhan Tora had virtually no real power. What’s more, by the end of the summer he was abducted by Soviet intelligence services. However, there were some minor differences in the points of view concerning his abduction. For example, some witnesses say he was taken by the KGB on July 28, 1946, first to the Medeo resort near Alma-Ata and then to Tashkent (Wang, 1993). In contrast, others say that the abduction occurred on August 16, 1946, when Tora accepted the invitation of four Soviet officers to have lunch in Khorgos and never returned (Forbes, 1986). But the essence remains the same: the abduction was performed by Soviet intelligence agencies with the goal of removing the political influence of Alikhan Tora and strengthening the pro-Soviet course of the ETR. As Brophy writes, “The ETR’s first chairman was Alikhan Tora, an anti-Soviet, whose religious authority

carried weight locally. He was eventually removed from office and replaced by the Soviet-educated Uyghur Ahmatjan-Qasimi...” (Millward, 2007).

Evidently Alikhan Tora’s distinctive Moslem bias played its part in his removal from power. Let us recall that the Turkic Islamic Republic of East Turkestan, based in Xinjiang 11 years earlier, was eliminated with the help of Soviet forces. The next pro-Soviet government, coming to power after Alikhan Tora, was of a secular character.

### **3. Ili National Army**

Soviet participation naturally had an impact on the formation of the Ili National Army (INA), which existed until the establishment of a Coalition government, when, according to a peace treaty, its divisions were transformed into “the units of the Chinese National Army and the Xinjiang Provincial Peace Preservation Corps” (Kayirken, 2008). INA was formed on April 8, 1945, and a little later was renamed the East Turkestan National Army, which included Uighurs, Kazakhs and Russian White Guards. The command of the army was carried out by Iskhakbek Muminov, Ivan Polinov, and Photios Lesquin, all of whom had a pro-Soviet political bias. All three gained military experience working for the USSR (Forbes, 1986).

Iskhakbek was trained in the USSR in the Frunze Military Academy among Kyrgyz and Tajik guerrillas and, after his return, became an officer of the Xinjiang National Army. At a young age Muminov had a disagreement with the ruling Kuomintang party and fled to Alma-Ata. In the territory of Soviet Kyrgyzstan he was involved in the formation of the Kazakh and Kyrgyz Special Forces for further work in Xinjiang. According to some scholars, he was in the pay of the Soviets (Lias, 1956).

The ETR Army was comprised of 60,000 soldiers. Different sources estimated that the ETR army ranged from 30,000 to over 69,000, depending on their own interests and relation to the ETR (Wang, 1993). There were also the regular forces of the Red Army numbering 500 officers and 2,000 soldiers. The Kazakh militia of the Karai (Kerei) tribe, commanded by Ospan and composed of approximately 20,000 riders, was also a part of the ETR army (Forbes, 1986).

In the formation of the Ilian Army, a significant role was played by Soviet military supplies, “They also promised to issue uniforms, pay, and rations which the Kazakh soldiers had never received before. At first the promises were received with incredulity. However, when they were kept, there was corresponding elation. Within a year, Ali Han Ture’s very irregular and nondescript Kazak guerillas had been

transformed into a disciplined force to which the Russian High Command felt justified in issuing, even at that early stage, a modest quantity of modern weapons.” (Lias, 1956)

Soviet instructors employed by the Provisional government worked to improve the level of military education. Three-month training courses were constantly held in Khorgos. The hierarchy system of the ETR army strongly resembled that of the Soviet Union: it also had divisions of soldiers, lieutenants, colonels, and generals that were reflected in the insignia, which was also based on the Soviet model.

Symbols on the insignia represented a combination of Moslem and Soviet symbols: they had the “red-orange crescent and five-pointed star”. The Soviet image of the East Turkestan warrior was complemented by acronyms (East Turkestan Republic) written in Cyrillic (Forbes, 1986).

#### **4. Coalition Government**

However, the autonomy of the ETR did not last long. In August 1945 the USSR and China signed “The Treaty of Friendship and Alliance,” leading to the establishment of the tripartite Coalition Government, which consisted of the three revolutionary districts, the remaining seven districts of Xinjiang and the central government of China. Signing the Treaty meant that the USSR could no longer openly support the ETR, since to maintain good political relations with China, it would need to cease its interference in China’s domestic affairs, including the East Turkestan Republic. Instead, the Soviet Union began persuading the ETR to agree to a truce, eventually playing a decisive role in the agreement between the rebels and the Kuomintang. At the same time, the Soviet Union joined the war with Japan; the wish to secure its long eastern border may have explained its decision to stop supporting the anti-Chinese rebels. Thus, the creation of the Coalition Government eventually led to the demise of the ETR as a republic. As follows from the interview with Makhsum, Soviet diplomats exerted pressure on the representatives of the ETR, forcing them to adopt many of the requirements of the Kuomintang. The Soviets did not simply take part in the negotiations between the ETR and Kuomintang, but instead became their initiators. Moreover, they stopped the spread of the uprising (Kamalov et al., 2010). In all these machinations, Xinjiang was “a bargaining chip and the ETR a ‘pawn in a larger game’” (Millward, 2007).

Successive leaders of the East Turkestan Republic in the Coalition government included Ahmatjan Qasimi, who became the leader of the Ili group after Alikhan Tora's disappearance, Abdukerim Abbasov and finally Dalelhan Sugirbaev.

Ahmatjan Qasimi (Kasimi) became the Deputy Chairman of Zhang Zhizhong; he was referred to as a "Stalin's man" not without reason. He was a member of the USSR Communist Party and even changed his surname to Kasimov, adding the Russian ending – ov (Forbes, 1986). He obtained his education, at least "most of it," in the USSR (Dickens, 2016). In his political career, he pursued a "secular, socialist agenda" (Millward, 2007) and, although Alikhan Tora was the official president, the real power in the ETR was concentrated in his hands (Dickens, 2016).

Abdukerim Abbasov, the Deputy Chief Secretary, was the second representative of the Three Districts in the Coalition Government (Benson, 1990). He was born in Soviet Kyrgyzstan. At the age of 16 he became acquainted with Saifutdin Azizi, who introduced him to the concept of communism and from whom he borrowed the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin. The works of Marxists deeply influenced his political consciousness (Jinghong, 2009).

The third representative of the Three Districts in the Coalition Government was Dalelhan Sugirbaev, the Minister of Health Service (Benson, 1990). His political orientation was so pro-Soviet that Jacobs calls him a "more pliant version of Osman" and an "ethnopolitical creature even more artificial and dependent than Osman" (Jacobs, 2016). This unflattering characterization confirms a close connection, or one might even say his dependence on the USSR.

Interestingly, Burhan Shahidi, who shared the post of Deputy Chairman with Qasimi, developed a very trusting relationship with the Soviet Union. In the period after the revolution of the Three Districts, he sought medical treatment in the Soviet Union over a period of two to three months; moreover, his health care was entrusted to the medical-sanitary department of the Kremlin.

"On his arrival of comrade Burhan Shagidov for the treatment in the USSR

1. To satisfy the request of Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (comrade Chou En-lai) and allow the visit to the Soviet Union for treatment for a period of 2-3 months of comrade Burhan Shagidov – Chairman of the Government of Xinjiang province of China.

2. Reception and service of comrade Burhan Shagidov entrust to the Council of Ministers of the USSR (Comrade Pomaznev), and health care – to the medical-sanitary

department of the Kremlin (Comrade Egorov).” (Draft resolutions of the Central Committee of the CPSU (b). RSA of S&PH. Fond 82. Inventory 2. Case 1260. Sheet 78)

Thus, after Alikhan Tora’s abduction, the ETR government assumed a purely pro-Soviet bias. Of great interest is the reflection of the change in the government in the Soviet historical science in the early days after the revolution of the Three Districts and the establishment of the East Turkestan Republic. During this period the “purification from the reactionary elements,” i.e., “feudals, tore and religious khojas” and the coming to power of “real revolutionaries and progressive democratic elements” were openly welcomed. A. Qasimi, I. Muminov and D. Sugirbaev, who had come to power, were characterized as “true sons of the people, ardent revolutionaries” (Badavamov, 1967).

Meanwhile, in the rest of China, the civil war between the Kuomintang and the Communists was drawing to a close. Inevitably, the victory of a party ideologically aligned with the Soviets engendered grave consequences for the Three Districts. By the autumn of 1949, the Kuomintang were completely defeated by the Communists. Mao Zedong, the head of the new ruling party, summoned the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, to which were invited the leaders of the Three Districts: Ahmatjan Qasimi, Ishak Beg Muminov and Dalelhan Sugirbaev. Although an objective of the conference was to incorporate the ETR into China, its leaders instead wanted to secure its autonomy. However, under very questionable circumstances, all three leaders were killed in a plane crash. Some speculate that, rather than dying in a crash, the delegation of leaders was removed from the plane in Alma-Ata and arrested. According to Zhapparov, a former KGB agent, he witnessed the unburned bodies of the ETR leaders. Another version of the incident posits that the leaders were convicted and imprisoned until the early 1960s. (Kamalov et al., 2010). It should be noted that five months after the plane crash, the dead bodies of the government officials were still in the hands of Soviet intelligence agencies. Azizi, at a reception of Gromyko (probably, the 1st Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR), on March 4 asked when the bodies would be transported to Alma-Ata and if they would be transported by his arrival in Xinjiang, for which he got the following answer, “S. Azizov’s request was accounted for by us and appropriate authorities are already busy with the case” (Draft resolutions of the Central Committee of the CPSU (b). RSA of S&PH. Fond 82. Inventory 2. Case 1252. Sheet 5). When the body of

Dalelhan Sugirbaev was returned to his family, his stepmother and son did not recognize him, observing that unlike the man in the coffin, Sugirbaev was much taller and also had a scar on one side of his body and less hairy legs (Orynbayeva, 2013). Despite these speculations, not all historians blame the USSR for the demise of the ETR delegation. For example, D. Brophy writes, “It seems unlikely that a Sino-Soviet deal in Xinjiang required the elimination of the ETR leadership, who had deviated little from Moscow’s instructions up to this point.” (Brophy, 2016) Thus, the death of the ETR government members remains a contentious and controversial issue to this day.

After the crash the government of the Three Districts was headed by Saifutdin Azizi. In the coalition government of Zhang Zhizhong, he served as the Minister of Education (Benson, 1990). He also had strong ties with the Soviet Union. After graduating from school in Xinjiang, he moved to the USSR, joined the Communist Party, and studied in Central Asian political institutions in Tashkent (Millward, 2007). Is it possible that he returned to Xinjiang as a Soviet agent? In any case, he headed a new delegation to the Conference which agreed to the ETR joining China.

### **5. Ospan. The volte-face**

Ospan-batyr, a minister without portfolio from the Three Districts’ side, fought ardently against the Chinese. No one could imagine that one day he would be fighting even harder against his old comrades-in-arms in the service of the Kuomintang. Nonetheless, in June of 1946, he resigned from his post as Governor, allegedly because of health problems, and began to attack not only the Kuomintang troops but also the supporters of the Three Districts. By the winter of 1946-1947, Ospan had shifted his allegiance entirely to the side of the Kuomintang. To understand the reasons for this transformation, one must examine Ospan’s personality and personal goals. Ospan was not simply a very strong and ambitious man; he intended to become a Khan. Choibalsan, the prime minister of Mongolia, promised Ospan to assist in the creation of an independent Altai Khanate (Barmin, 2005). Not without reason, Chinese officials suspected that Soviet agents had prompted Ospan to proclaim this independent state and had supported him, since for them, at that time, “Mongolian” was equivalent to “Soviet” (Foreign Relations of the United States, 1947). On June 22, 1943, Ospan was proclaimed Khan, the “legitimate successor of Genghis Khan.” The ceremony was attended by Choibalsan and two representatives of the USSR (Dickens,

2016). Having become a khan, Ospan was no longer satisfied with the role of governor (Jacobs, 2016). Moreover, the influence of the USSR had increased in the Three Districts and he did not feel safe, especially after the abduction of Alikhan Tora (Millward, 2007).

Interestingly, Ospan attended the meetings of British Consul Ferguson and American Vice-consul MacKiernan with “Kuomintang generals and pro-Chinese leaders of nationalist movements and combat units,” (Barmin, 2005) thus showing his pro-China bias. This political orientation is further demonstrated by financial transactions that took place between the provincial government and the Government of the Altai, headed by Ospan. Whether he was simply taking money from the Kuomintang to use in his own fight for the Kazakhs or as a bribe to shift his political allegiance is a matter of debate, but the two parties surely found a common language. He received the first tranche in July 1946, as a part of 40 million, sent by the new government to Urumchi for the “liberation of the three districts.” In May 1947 the second payment of 30 million was allotted notably for the Altay district “in recognition of the past bitter years.” (Benson & Svanberg, 1988).

This strategic move of the Kuomintang brought Ospan to their side; as a result, 20,000 Kazakhs under the rule of the talented commander first stopped fighting the Kuomintang, and eventually started fighting for them. For Ospan it provided considerable material support from the Kuomintang and the US. After the transition of Ospan to the side of the Kuomintang, the US, who supported it, began to help Ospan as well. Sung Xi-Liang, the commander in East Turkestan, participated in the formation and arming of Ospan’s military unit “with the blessing of the American consul in Urumqi MacKiernan.” In the spring of 1947 the battle between the unit of Ospan, instructed by Sung Xi-Liang, and the troops of the Three Districts in the Altai occurred. Ospan was defeated, after which the Kuomintang sent him weapons and medicines, as well as instructors.

## **6. The Peitashan Incident – unignited wick of the Third World war**

But what was probably the most dramatic episode explicating the features of the Cold War occurred in June 1947 – the Peitashan Incident (known also as the Battle of Baitag Bogd Mountain), which was to lead the world to a new war. At this stage, all members of the East Turkestan conflict lined up facing each other: on the one hand,

the United States, the Kuomintang, and the Ospan; and on the other hand, the Soviet Union, Mongolia, and the Three Districts.

The ground for the conflict in many respects was created by the lack of a formal line of demarcation (Wang, 1993). The frontier was determined by the area of migration of Mongol tribes, which moved over the preceding 40 years by approximately 200 miles (Foreign Relations of the United States, 1947). David Wang writes that Chinese troops of Ma Xizhen had already been located in Peitashan two months prior to the incident, but Mongolia protested against it only on June 2 (Wang, 1993). Besides Chinese troops there were Kazakh troops, loyal to the Kuomintang (Foreign Relations of the United States, 1947). These were probably Ospan's units, which entered Peitashan in early June, 1947, fleeing from the 'Three Districts' troops. After that, Mongolia demanded to withdraw troops within 72 hours. There was also a 48-hour ultimatum demanding the return of eight Outer-Mongolian soldiers captured by the Chinese. After this period, on June 5, Mongolian troops, supported by a Soviet battalion and four trucks, attacked Chinese positions (Brophy, 2016). The ground attack was supported by four planes bombing and shelling. The planes had on wings and fuselage the Soviet emblem of the red star with hammer and sickle (Foreign Relations of the United States, 1947). Sung's order authorizing the release of prisoners did not reach the Peitashan commander before the bombing occurred. Two Chinese soldiers were killed and 30 horses destroyed.

Sung believed that the Soviet-Mongolian attack was directed against Ospan and was intended to weaken his links with Ashan (Altai) and was planned by the Soviets, who had their own reasons to keep the situation tense (Foreign Relations of the United States, 1947). Perhaps one of the aims of the attack was to support the pro-Soviet Commissioner Lee Rihan and establish his authority in Xinjiang (Li Chang, 1954).

In his turn, Badavamov calls the events "a provocation on the part of US intelligence, carried out with a view of deterioration of relations with the Soviet Union and the suppression of the liberation movement in the three districts." He writes that the attack on the Mongolian border was specifically organized with the participation of MacKiernan in person (Badavamov, 1967). It should be noted about the works of L. Badavamov that, despite the notable Soviet rhetoric, he used rare Chinese-language sources (e.g., Van-I-Hu "Beytik events," Urumqi, 1958), which, with the necessary criticism, supply the researchers with valuable information.



D. Wang also writes that the Peitashan Incident was to some extent beneficial to the Kuomintang because it allowed the start of an anti-Soviet and anti-communist campaign in the country. In the main governmental newspapers there was the information that the USSR and Outer Mongolia had attacked China (Wang, 1993). The conflict was to some extent useful to Chan because it diverted attention from the student strikes and other domestic problems (Foreign Relations of the United States, 1947).

It should be noted that the Altai was under strong Soviet influence. Ospan even characterized the situation in the following way, “It is to all intents a part of the Soviet Union.” “Ili and Tahcheng zones are also Soviet dominated though activities are less openly carried on in these areas than in Ashan zone.”

Ospan also thought that Mongolia planned the occupation of Peitashan to eradicate the Chinese influence, which meant strengthening Soviet influence, as “the Outer Mongolian Republic is to all intents and purposes a Soviet puppet, its armies Soviet-trained, equipped, and disciplined, and thus Outer Mongolia itself is an instrument of Soviet foreign policy whenever it suits the purpose of Moscow.” (Foreign Relations of the United States, 1947) According to Ospan, war plans went “to the southeast to Barkul and to the Karliktagh Mountains to threaten the roads from Kansu to eastern Sinkiang” (Foreign Relations of the United States, 1947). Ospan was ready to “remove Outer Mongolian threat to Peitashan and clear the Ashan zone of the Reds under Talihan,” if his units were provided with necessary ammunition before the attack. He planned to take everything necessary from his adversaries then (Foreign Relations of the United States, 1947).

It is natural to assume that the weapons were received by Ospan and in September 1947 he launched an attack on Ashan, which resulted in the occupation of Chenghua and Fuwen. He also captured tungsten mines in Fuwen, and there naturally followed a protest on the part of the Soviet Union. Chinese troops, as Sung claims, did not take part in the attack, but he acknowledges that they helped with weapons and ammunition (Foreign Relations of the United States, 1947).

On September 21, Ospan occupied Chinhua, causing the enemy to flee. As a result, the power in Ashan transferred to Ospan. Here, it may be supposed, Ospan’s adversary was Dalelhan Sugirbaev armed with Soviet weapons. After the defeat he returned to the battlefield with six panzers, causing Ospan’s retreat (Foreign Relations of the United States, 1947). This was a significant moment in the history of Kazakhs:

two Kazakhs met in a battle, one for China's interests and the other for the Soviets', probably thinking that they were fighting for the fate of their nation.

As well as Ospan's activities, the Kuomintang plans in Xinjiang were also under the watchful eye of the CIA. Paxton and MacKiernan planned the actions of General Sung. They wanted to conduct "a sudden attack from several directions accompanied by cutting of the vulnerable road communications" against, as Sung supposed, the 60,000 member Three Districts army (Foreign Relations of the United States, 1947).

The wish to occupy Ashan is probably connected to the possibility of mining tungsten and some other minerals on its territory. According to reports of MacKiernan, who refers to Ospan, the Soviets in Ashan (Altai) near Chenghua (Sharasume) and Fuwen (Koktobe) were extracting four minerals, "tungsten, wolymbyet, beryl and spodumene." (Foreign Relations of the United States, 1947) "Soviet mining expedition of about 200 men, according to Ospan, Kazak chieftain, entered Ashan zone in May 1946 by truck accompanied by Red Army guards and established airfield at Chenghua" (Millward, 2007).

Mining was conducted in Koktobe (Fuwen) and Chenghua (Aertai/Sharasume) (Foreign Relations of the United States, 1947). For the production of tungsten the Soviets suspended the work in the gold mines, which shows the exceptional importance of tungsten to the Soviet Union in that period. It is worth noting that tungsten is used in the production of nuclear weapons alongside uranium, (Elements of Fission Weapon Design, 2016) and its alloys "have a high protective effect exceeding by 40 percent lead's protective properties, and therefore they (tungsten alloys) are used as a base material in the manufacture of containers for the storage of radioactive substances" (Tungsten price on the world market). L. Benson also noted that spodumene "is the source of beryllium, which forms an alloy widely used in atomic reactors; the latter is also called lithium aluminum silicate and is used in thermonuclear explosives" (Benson, 1990).

It should be mentioned that the expedition, apart from its direct activities, also carried out such an important function as the transfer of weapons to the Three Districts. Ospan, for example, says that through the expedition his adversaries transferred the "material including mortars and light artillery," and "in March Mongols supplied them with about 100 rifles."

During the conflict, as well as during the period starting from early 1947, Ospan fought on the side of the Kuomintang. But the instruction of Sung Si-liang, referred to

by Badavamov, is of special interest with regards to the Peitashan Incident, “Now we have to attack Mongolia, extend the conflict and dump all the blame on the Soviet Union and the government of the three districts. This idea is supported and inspired by our great ally of the US.” This instruction informs us of two important facts: the 1st – Ospan executed the orders of the Kuomintang, and the 2nd – Peitashan was not just a border conflict. What was it then?

We will probably be able to answer this question on examining the following documents. First of all, an instruction of the Kuomintang government in Nanjing and the US Embassy considered at a secret meeting in the second half of June 1947, which was attended by Sung Si-liang, General-Bi Yuan Shuang (Assistant of Sung), Paxton and his assistant MacKiernan, read: “We must make an effort to find an appropriate charge against the Soviet Union, to achieve the condemnation of Soviet policy in the UN and to find a pretext for incitement of war with it.” This document was complemented by another one from the US Embassy in Nanking, which read: “Of course, we need a scandal, but the most important thing for us is to ignite a war, since it is the most important goal for us” (Badavamov, 1967). Interestingly, Mackiernan and then Paxton were going to personally go to the location of the Peitashan Incident (Foreign Relations of the United States, 1947). Moreover, Badavamov writes about some manipulation with “physical evidence of the MPR aggression.” According to him, foreign correspondents and Ping Chaux-ping, the head of the Department of Agitation and Propaganda, who was in charge of the incident investigation, photographed pre-prepared materials, which later received wide coverage in the world press. They later planned to consider the case in the UNO. The efforts to collect the evidence of the MPR, and, consequently, the Soviet Union aggression, show that the Peitashan Incident might serve as a pretext for the planned World War III.

But the Peitashan Incident did not cause the expected criticism of the USSR actions, and within a month the little criticism that existed subsided. At the same time, criticism of the US increased, and there was very little positive publicity (Foreign Relations of the United States, 1947). Such a situation with mass media was obviously not favorable for an information attack on the Soviet Union and could not serve as a pretext for incitement of war.

Nevertheless, the United States planned to start World War III, and MacKiernan used it as a lever of influence not only on Ospan, but on other Kazakh leaders, such as Husayin Taiji, “Upon arriving in Srinagar or New Delhi, prominent Uighur and Kazak

refugees invariably asked US and British visitors the same two questions. First, what had happened to their good friend Douglas MacKiernan? Second, when would World War III break out?" (Jacobs, 2016).

MacKiernan persuaded Ospan to continue the resistance. An interesting fact that one needs to know about Douglas MacKiernan, with reference to Ospan, is that in some Chinese sources, he is called "the puppetmaster" (Millward, 2007). Jacobs notes that before his capture, Ospan accused MacKiernan of duping him into "igniting a rebellion." Little by little, Kazakhs started to feel that they were manipulated by the Western intelligence agencies (Jacobs, 2016).

G. Lias stated that the retreating Ospan and his men wrote letters asking for the help of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek and General Eisenhower, "If no help reaches us, we can hold out here for one year, no longer. If no help comes, we will fight our way out." Posters, hung on Ospan by the Chinese at the time of execution, may serve as indirect evidence of his relations with the Western powers. One of them read: "He said he would deliver Turkistan from the Chinese, but in fact he sold out to the British and Americans." In communist newspapers, according to Lias, Ospan was called "the traitor who had tried to sell them to the capitalists."

MacKiernan, who stayed in Xinjiang to destroy documents before the Chinese Communist Army entered, on the way back from Xinjiang, met Ospan and Zhanymhan, who were on the run. According to the Soviet documents, during this journey he kept in touch with the Kuomintang by means of two radio installations. Ospan here is characterized as "a Watchdog of the Kuomintang reactionaries." MacKiernan tried to persuade Ospan and Zhanymhan not to obey the government of the province and promised a support in a military assault. When he was leaving for Tibet, he left Ospan and 94 White Russians who were his bodyguards 25 taels of gold as a foundation for the organization of the insurgency and said to them to be fully prepared for the upcoming Third World War, being in complete readiness for action (Records, information of V.M. Molotov. RSA of S&PH. Fond 82. Inventory 2. Case 1261. Sheet 87).

Thomas Laird writes that MacKiernan could have reached his destination much earlier, but he made a mysterious detour. His whereabouts at that time remained a mystery. The statement of Burhan Shahidi helps to shed light on these intricate events. From it the whereabouts of MacKiernan in the period around September 29 and for

20 days become known: he spent this time with Ospan and Dzhanyman, trying to fulfill his mission – provide the loyalty of the nomads in the case of the world war.

### **Discussion**

In this article, we discover and substantiate a new perspective on the first armed conflict of the Cold War. In the three Kazakh districts of Xinjiang, remote, as it seems, from the world political arena, events took place directly related to the formation of the future bipolar world. Based on the foregoing, researchers face a number of questions related to the interactions of groups of Kazakhs with each other, Kazakhs with other Turkic-speaking peoples of Xinjiang, Turkics of Xinjiang with representatives of other peoples and confessions inhabiting the region. Let us express our wish to future researchers of the topic to dwell in more detail on the following questions:

1. The personalities of the leaders of large and small groups of insurgents, the leaders of the East Turkestan Republic, the Chinese administration, Soviet diplomats and employees of foreign special services, their life before the events under study.
2. Direct and indirect consequences of the uprising, whether the rebels have made serious changes in their position.
3. It would be especially interesting to look at the topic from the standpoint of related disciplines.

Studying the topic in the proposed directions could give deeper, and possibly unexpected results and introduce new data into scientific circulation that are useful in solving problems at the moment.

### **Conclusion**

MacKiernan was shot by Tibetan border guards while attempting to cross the frontier. He carried away with him to the grave the mystery of hundreds of burnt documents describing the work of the US intelligence agencies in Xinjiang. Soon the troops of Chinese Communists entered Xinjiang, and the Three Districts became a part of China again. Mao called the revolution of the Three Districts a part of the revolution in China, and Saifutdin Azizi, as head of a new delegation, sent to replace the one dead in the crash, agreed to the Three Districts joining the rest of Xinjiang. Ospan-batyr was executed, and the Kazakhs fleeing with him emigrated from

Xinjiang. Thus ended the history of the Three Districts revolution, which appeared to be useless both to the Soviet Union and to now Communist and Soviet-friendly China.

So, the Revolution of the Three Districts, as one of the Cold War theaters, proved to be profitable for the USSR, since as a result of economic relations with the ETR it received an atomic bomb of its own, bridging the gap in weapons with the US. For the US it was hardly successful, as they, represented by Kuomintang, were actually defeated in Xinjiang, failing to ignite World War III. They also lost their talented envoy Douglas MacKiernan. But one should suppose that his personality and activities will become the subject of numerous future studies, which will reveal surprising and unexpected facts about his death from a bullet shot by a Tibetan border guard.

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