

The History of East Turkestan

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The XUAR (Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region) is the largest and westernmost region in China and is also home to the Uyghurs, a Turkic Muslim group. The communist Chinese government has initiated in the past decade a process that is textbook cultural genocide. For example, the opening of labor and concentration camps for supposed criminals, tyrannical law enforcement, and a suffocating military presence. The CCP (Chinese Communist Party) is dead set on eliminating what they consider to be a threat. Uyghur connection to Xinjiang, or as they refer to it, East Turkestan, runs deep and is ancient, and is important context for understanding the full context of the present situation.

The Uyghur presence in Xinjiang dates back to about 800 CE, after the collapse of the Uyghur Khaganate that was active around the Mongolian region. Early reports place the Tocharian People hailing from the Caucasus in Northern Xinjiang and Iranian-speaking groups in its southern region (Pillalamarri). The Han Dynasty discovered the area in 130 BCE, starting a prosperous era of trade, as multiple city-states were established and Buddhism arose in the region (Pillalamarri). This period ended around the year 1000 CE, 190 years after the fall of the Uyghur Khaganate, when the early Uyghurs fled to and settled in the region (Uyghur Academy).

The earliest findings show the Uyghurs as a Turkic people, subjects of multiple Central Asian empires, starting with the Huns (220 BCE – 386 CE), followed by the Tabgach (Toba) Empire (386 CE-554 CE), and finally, the Kok Turk Empire (552 CE-744 CE), after Kutluk Bilge Kul established the Uyghur Khaganate (Uyghur Academy). The Khaganate's short reign was prosperous, gaining many victories over the Chinese, but the Tang Dynasty defeated the Khaganate in 810 CE. This prompted the mass migration into the then-unnamed Xinjiang region,

which at that time was named Altishahr, meaning “Six Cities,” referencing the six cities of the region (Introvigne). After this, three Uyghur Kingdoms would rise and fall: the Kanchou Uyghur Kingdom (850 CE-1228 CE) in what is now China’s Kansu Province, the Karakhoja Uyghur Kingdom that began in 846 CE in the Tianshan Mountains, and the Karakhanid Uyghur Kingdom in the southern part of Khan Tegri that began in 840 CE (Uyghur Academy). The latter two would last until the Buddhist Dzungar Khanate conquered the Altishahr in the seventeenth century (Introvigne). In the twelfth century, the Karakhanids became Muslim, causing the Uyghurs to begin to resemble the modern group (Uyghur Academy).

The Uyghurs resisted the Dzungar reign by siding with the Qing Chinese in their onslaught against the Buddhist Khanate (Introvigne), ending when the Chinese Manchu Dynasty took the region in 1759 (Uyghur Academy). Until 1863, the Uyghurs staged forty-two revolts against the Manchus, the last of which was successful, and three years later, the Uzbeks led by Yakub Beg took the region with Uyghur support. In 1876, the Manchus recaptured the region, which was at that time called East Turkestan, collapsing Beg’s empire. It was at this time the region was named Xinjiang, meaning “new frontier” (Introvigne), as it is China’s furthest west region. Xinjiang was properly annexed by China in 1884, following which there was a Uyghur separatist movement in the early 1900s. This movement was when the term “Uyghur” began to be used to refer to the Muslim inhabitants of Xinjiang; before, the term was only for descendants of the Uyghur Khaganate’s subjects, as there also existed remnants from other empires that occupied the region as well as miscellaneous Muslim migrants (Introvigne). This separatist movement resisted the Nationalist Chinese regime which lasted from 1911-1949 (Uyghur Academy), and the movement was backed by the Bolsheviks who wanted East Turkestan to be a Soviet republic. From 1933-1934 and 1944-1949, two successful revolts bore short-lived Uyghur

republics, but after Mao Zedong's communist takeover of China, the revolts ceased. The Russian interests seemed to change after the first successful revolt, as they aided China's recapture of the region in both instances.

Despite designating Xinjiang as the Uyghur Autonomous Zone, Mao encouraged Hans, the majority ethnic group of China, to move to the region (Introvigne). The suppression of Uyghurs would continue and intensify into the modern day as policy continues to intensify and security tightens (China's Problem With the Uyghurs). The CCP's collectivist ideology despises religion, and the government, fearing another Uyghur uprising, has endeavored to annihilate Uyghur culture. Allowing the Uyghurs to preserve a unique ethnic and religious identity from China could potentially inspire other cultural revivals that threaten communist control, making it even more imperative that the CCP quench a Uyghur revival. Though the region is labeled "autonomous," that is true in name only, and if left unhindered, the CCP will extinguish a part of history.

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