



An Anthropological Look at the Komintern Archives

Sabine Trebinjac

*(Laboratory of Ethnology and Comparative Sociologie
(LESC), CNRS and Nanterre University, France)*

The story begins with Stalin's idea to annex the northeast and northwest of China, not only through infiltration by emissaries but also by educating cohorts of young migrants at the Communist University of the Eastern Workers located in Moscow. The whole strategy was implemented with Beria as the prime conductor, and the date offensive was decided. However, Stalin died exactly the day before it was due to proceed and everything was cancelled. This paper will attempt to explain how all this was organized.

At the Komintern Archives in Moscow, there are documents that show how Soviet communists tried to educate a circle of Uyghur revolutionaries, who, once they returned home, were supposed to spread what they had learned in the USSR. The entire Uyghur population would then support the communist ideal, in this case, by turning away from China and joining the USSR.

I present here a section of those archives, namely collection n° 532. First, I would like to draw attention to the secret nature of the archives, which were inaccessible to researchers for a long time. Second, because of the difficulty of accessing them, they were long ignored as archives. Finally, as French historian Serge Wolikow pointed out, the archives themselves are ruled by the "secret of opacity," which is to say that the archives themselves reinforce secrecy. The people referred to in them, for example, are given false, Russi-

fied names. This secrecy, which makes researching the archives difficult, must be kept in mind. My goal has been to study the Communist University for Eastern Workers (KUTV), and to analyze its work, structure, organization, failures, and accomplishments between 1925 and 1935.

KUT: a University of Soviet Administration

KUTV was conceived as a school for Soviet administrators, even though no students were educated there; instead, workers, especially farm workers, attended the university.

The university was founded in Moscow in 1924 and continued until 1935. I have focussed on the years 1925 to 1935, because the first Uyghurs arrived in 1925. At the University, weekly or twice-weekly meetings were held to discuss current issues; all workers were expected to attend. I found information for the 50 workers who generally attended the meetings. Most were Uyghurs (41 out of 50). Among the Uyghurs, 18 were farm workers and 13 were factory workers. They were all born between 1891 and 1913, and were between the ages of 20 to 30 when they attended the university.

I then examined the minutes in detail and organized them around several themes.

1. Two fronts

Through a careful reading of the meeting minutes, I have discovered that the Komintern (Communist International) had decided to invade Xinjiang from two different positions. The first was from northern Xinjiang, to the north of the Tianshan mountains, in a district called Dzungaria. All documents relating to this area can be found in collection n° 532, Part 1. The second was near the city of Kashgar in south-western Xinjiang province, and was referred to as the Kashgar Circle. All documents concerning this area are to be found in collection n° 532, Part 2.

2. Recruitment

Let us look at how and why KUTV “students” were recruited. Generally speaking, all students were sent to the University through the IKKI (*Isponitelnie Komitet Komunistitcheskovo Internationatsionala*, or the Executive Committee of Communist International). However, it seems that the Uyghur people were not covered by this rule. In March 1925, the president of the KUTV asked Moscow to send a group of 35 students from Dzungaria. The reason given was that, since 1912, there had been a revolutionary Dzungar nationalist movement that was not overseen by the Komsomol (initiated in 1918, the Komsomol, an organization for young people between 14 and 28 years old, was a kind of anteroom for the Bolshevik party) or by the Bolshevik party. Unchecked, their activities developed into a sort of pan-Turkish Islamism. It thus became obvious that revolutionary activities might be carried out in southern Xinjiang, but also that future leaders would have to be trained at the KUTV.

According to the minutes of a meeting that took place in 1927, the meeting was to discuss “KUTV students from Xinjiang.” It appears that out of the class of twelve students, seven were Uyghurs, two were Dungan (Muslim Han or Hui, who fled to Kyrgyzstan in the 19th century), two were Kalmuk and one was Kazakh. The Kalmuk students came after having been officially assigned there; the rest came from Central Asian republics (i.e., the USSR), or from Mongolia. That means that no one from Eastern Turkestan—also known as Xinjiang—was recruited by the Komintern.

Why, then, was this account titled “declaration concerning students of KUTV coming from Xinjiang”? Who profited from this lie? The president of the Party gave us an explanation: Comrades who presented themselves as Uyghur were in reality from southern Kazakhstan (i.e., the USSR).

I also found evidence of another method of recruitment that seems particularly strange. A student who had been expelled from the KUTV was then admitted to the Lenin School under a false name. This former KUTV student then recruited young people in Kyrgyzstan who were later admitted to the KUTV, as ordered by the Komintern. Another group of students had been recruited two years earlier by another former student and admitted without any outside verification. These two groups then had a very violent dispute, after which an official explained that the Uyghur group must be divided into three groups in accordance with their sort of recruitment.

The first group was to comprise students who joined the university through their own efforts; among them were Uyghurs from Central Asia (i.e., the USSR) who would never go to Xinjiang and who wished to work in Central Asia. The second group, those recruited by the above-mentioned former student without any outside verification. And the third, very young unemployed and inexperienced Uyghurs, who were officially recruited by KUTV staff. The rigidity of Komintern behavior seems to reflect their uncomfortable situation.

3. Interethnic rivalries

There were many instances of interethnic rivalry.

First, as the Uyghurs and the Dungan entertain an almost visceral antagonism, the Uyghur people see the Dungan more as Han Chinese than as Islamic brothers. Then, among the Dungan themselves, there were often fights arising from the deep and well-known division between the Masanjinov and the Suleymanov clans, a division often mentioned in accounts of the meeting.

Finally, I should note that at one point there were a large number of Chinese students at the KUTV. Between 1925 and 1930, more than 1200 Chinese students were trained at the KUTV. Meeting minutes show that Turkestani students (including Uyghur) joined together with Chinese students, were then separated, and then got back together.

In conclusion, I would say that the KUTV was an authoritarian institution in which secrecy, supervision, denunciations, criticism, and self-criticism were key words. However, at same time it was a place full of deep resentment and interethnic rivalry.

4. Teaching

Let us look at the teaching provided at KUTV.

Over a three-year period, students attended a variety of classes. In 1932, in one sector of the 8th section, there were 23 professors for 12 subjects and 30 students. A year later, there were 28 professors for 30 students. Acknowledging this mismanagement, the decision was made to reduce the number of teachers to 14 or 15.

In the first year, students studied seven different subjects for a total of 1,341 hours. Subjects included political economy; history of the Bolshevik party; history of the revolutionary movement; military tactics; languages; and geography.

In the second year, they studied nine subjects for a total of 1,208 hours. Subjects included: history of the revolutionary movement; political economy; history of the Bolshevik party; geography; military tactics; history of the Communist International; agricultural theory; Russian language; and Communist Party structure.

And in the third year, they studied eight subjects for 1,130 hours. Subjects included: materialist dialectics; the history of the Communist International; Communist Party structure; geography; agricultural theory; Leninism; youth movements; and professional development.

In 1933, other classes were added, such as the Origin of Islam (30 hours), the Philosophy of Islam (30 hours), the Soviet movement in China (40 hours), and native language instruction (28 hours).

We thus understand that, from this time on, the Komintern intended to adapt its teaching to the needs of individual students.

5. Living conditions

The course load just described was not designed for “backward,” or less still for illiterate students. Therefore, the students faced enormous difficulties.

Generally speaking, the students were young, ranging between 20 to 30 years old, and were more accustomed to rural than to urban life. One might easily imagine that during the years 1925 to 1935, living conditions at the KUTV would have been restrictive and even abusive. The young men were without any female company, and family contact was forbidden; they were also punished for breaking internal rules. If they stood accused, they would also have to carry out self-criticism.

Moreover, the so-called workers were identified not by a number but by a Russified name that was given to them when they were admitted to the university. Their own identity was wiped out; their real names appeared in only one place in some of the minutes, under the rubric “Genuine last name.”

We also are aware that three to nine students were living together per room. In 1932, for example, five rooms housed three, five, six, six, and nine students, respectively. One can imagine how difficult this would have been for young men used to nomadic life, or used to living in adobe houses with a central *kang* (bed) for the whole family.

They were fed Russian meals: potatoes, bread, and buckwheat, rather than noodles, rice and mutton. Many students became ill and I observed the mention of some of them having had liver disease, pneumonia, and brain diseases.

Twice a year, students received clothes, especially a warm, heavy overcoat, which could later be bartered for a service.

Leisure time was organized and obligatory, and included short excursions, theater, and cinema. In 1933, in order to attract more students, the Party committee decided to give one free evening plus the following day each week for cultural activities.

6. Bad behavior

Many instances of bad behavior were cited in the minutes: lies (about ethnic identity, social class), fights, expressions of regionalism, and nationalism, or personal initiatives.

By looking at the opposite of these behaviors, we get a description of the ideal man desired by Communists. The ideal man should be young, healthy, well educated, multilingual, impartial, honest, calm, obedient, devoted to the community, a Party informant, selfless, motivated, active, of good family background, respect class status, and be without family ties, or foreign relations. Is this an ideal man or a fantasy?

Results

In 1932, eight students out of a total of thirty-six were dismissed from the KUTV and sent to work in factories located outside of Moscow. A year later, only five students graduated, and of those five only three became genuine revolutionary activists and were sent to Xinjiang.

Third-year students did not have much more to offer in the way of revolutionary activists. Only two out of six students were said to be available for work in their home countries. Under the circumstances, the party organizer asked for around six or seven more students to be sent from Central Asia, so that after an intensive year's study they could be sent back "home."

In December 1933, minutes of the meeting offered this description of seven students: six have to be dismissed from KUTV and sent to work in factories outside of Moscow, and one must be severely punished for lying to protect two friends of his that had foreign contacts.

In 1934, the minutes of meetings reveal that meetings changed to become "production meetings," in which teachers and students exchanged questions, compliments, and criticisms without any distinction of role or status. A new reform was planned for 1935 concerning the recruitment of staff. Also future students of the KUTV would also undergo training in factories. Neither of these plans was ever carried out.

The Central Asia Program at The George Washington University aims to promote high-quality academic research on contemporary Central Asia, and to become an interface for the policy, academic, diplomatic and business communities. It calls for a multidisciplinary approach and provides a platform for different, and even sometimes contradictory, points of view on contemporary Central Asia. The CAP strives to bring together counterparts from the United States, Europe, Russia, Asia and Central Asia by promoting various forms of interaction and initiating joint projects.

www.centralasiaprogram.org.

©Central Asia Program 2014