CHAPTER 4

The Significance of a National Boundary in Flux (1930s and 1940s)

This chapter considers the transformation of the discourse of the East Turkestanis’ national boundary and national interest in a new geopolitical context: Xinjiang’s de facto submission to the jurisdiction of the ROC’s central government between 1944 and 1949. The first section of this chapter concentrates on the ideology of Turkic activists, politicians, and intellectuals associated with the KMT. These figures were first active in the 1930s, while being affiliated with the central government in Nanking, and formulated their ideas of nation and national interest in a periodical, the Voice of Chinese Turkestan (Chiniy Türkistan Awazi; vCT). After the central government restored its authority in Xinjiang in the early 1940s, several of these activists assumed high posts in the provincial apparatus and were thus able to promote national consciousness to their fellow Turkic nationals, as well as to vie for Turkic national interests at the provincial and central level. Sources such as Mes’ud Sabiri’s A Speech (Bir Nutuq) and Awareness of Being a Turk (Türklük Orani), Muhammed Imin Bughra’s Struggle by the Pen for the Homeland and the Nation (Yurt we Millet Heqqide Qelem Kürishi), and Polat Qadiri’s Slogan of Freedom (Erk Shoari) and Provincial History (Ölke Tarikhi) reveal that the altered geopolitical situation coerced their authors to reevaluate the importance of the East Turkestanis’ national boundary and national interest. A structurally similar reevaluation occurred in the discourse of ideologists who performed nation work during a revolutionary movement, which erupted in northern Xinjiang’s three northern districts simultaneously with the KMT’s takeover of the province in the fall of 1944. The movement proclaimed a second East Turkestan Republic (ETR) in November 1944 that remained independent from the provincial government until 1949. Texts spawned by this insurgency, namely the Revolutionary East Turkestan (Inqilabiy Sherqi Türkistan) and three other sources examined in this research, reveal that their authors formulated concepts of a Uyghur national boundary and national interest that were also potently shaped by the altered geopolitical position of the rebellious northern Xinjiang.
4.1 Republican Turkic Nationalism (1930s–49)

After Sheng Shicai terminated his affirmative action and staged his great purge in 1937, he upheld the pro-Soviet orientation of his policy. He also allowed cadres of the CPC, which had encamped in Yan’an in the Shaanxi province after the traumatizing Long March (長征 Chāngzhēng; 1934–35), to take up advisory positions in the Xinjiang administration. But in 1941, after the Soviets signed a nonaggression pact with Japan, after Germany invaded the Soviet Union, and after the U.S. had joined the war in the Pacific against Japan, Sheng switched sides and initiated rapprochement with Chiang Kai-shek, executing all CPC cadres and severing all ties to the Soviet Union. The first KMT office in Urumchi was established in January 1943, and later that year, the first U.S. consulate opened in the city. The KMT continued moving into the province even after Sheng once again attempted to restore the alliance with the Soviets in 1943. He failed and was forced by Chiang to give up his provincial post in September 1944. Thus, for the first time since the birth of the ROC on January 1, 1912, the central government was able to assert its authority over Xinjiang (Ezizi 1997a, 389–90; Forbes 1986, 157–62; Millward 2007, 210–11).

Reintegrating Xinjiang under ROC’s central government was a culmination of the KMT’s complex effort to regain control over the spacious northwest ruled by warlords and military cliques since the fall of the empire. Ever since the proclamation of the Nationalist government in 1925 in Canton and the capture of Beijing in 1928, the KMT party-state presented itself as a nationalistic authority that was determined to reunify the vast territory and numerous ethnocultural groups and lands, such as Tibet or Outer Mongolia, inherited by the republic from the Qing dynasty. This aspiration was also directed toward numerous warlord-controlled regions within the interior and along China’s borderlands. This objective gained even more importance after the military incursion of Japan into northeastern and eastern China in the early 1930s. At that moment, the northwest started to be considered by the KMT policymakers as one of several potential new power bases where the central government could retreat in the face of an imminent Japanese attack on Nanking. In the early 1930s, as a result of negotiations with the Ma (馬) family of warlords, who were in control of the Ningxia, Gansu, and Qinghai provinces, the central government managed to generate at least a propagandist image of a projection of its power into the area. This policy led to what has been termed the “rhetorical development” of the Great Northwest (大西北 dà Xīběi) and what was to materialize during the actual military takeover by the KMT troops ten years later (Lin 2007, 6–21; Lin 2011, 34–48).