

## The Central Asian Uprising of 1916

David Seed

In the Central Asian section of Gravity's Rainbow Pynchon introduces the Kirghiz character Džaqyp Qulan through his memory of his father's death. Džaqyp Qulan will become Tchitcherine's sidekick, and therefore it is strategic to introduce historical information which will explain a tension in their relationship. After all, the whole section deals with the attempts of a strong central government to enforce conformity to certain standards of literacy. The issue of alphabetization is only one specific example of cultural colonialization; it links Central Asia analogically to the settlement of the pampas and disappearance of the gauchos, and to the treatment of the Hereros at the hands of the Germans. By setting up these analogies, Pynchon invites the reader to make comparisons and draw a pattern in colonialistic activity. Javaid Qazi has shown in considerable detail what source materials were used for the Central Asian section, but has said nothing about the 1916 uprising which preceded the compulsory introduction of literacy by some ten years.<sup>1</sup> Pynchon's source for details of this uprising is a monograph by Edward Dennis Sokol entitled The Revolt of 1916 in Russian Central Asia.<sup>2</sup> Thomas Winner refers to this work in a footnote in his study The Oral Art and Literature of the Kazakhs of Russian Central Asia, which Qazi demonstrates was used by Pynchon for describing the ajtys or singing duel later in this section.

The uprising was a spontaneous reaction against Russian attempts to introduce conscription, and it spread from the Sarts to the Dungans, Kazakh, Kirghiz and Turkoman peoples (the latter is not mentioned by Pynchon). The revolt of the Kirghiz and Kazakh in Semirechie province was the most serious and caused the most deaths (114-15), although there was widespread killing by Russian soldiers and civilians (127-28). Pynchon's analogy with the Wild West is not just a matter of rhetoric, since the governor-general of Turkistan, Kuropatkin, noted in his journal that lynch

law had virtually got out of control (128). The natives for the most part improvised their weapons, as Pynchon states, only the Kirghiz having a significant number of rifles. It was a vastly uneven fight even though most Russian soldiers were occupied at the front, and Sokol gives some examples of daily numbers of killings (109). Once it was clear that the uprising had failed, streams of refugees headed for Western China as did Džaqyp Qulan's father in Gravity's Rainbow. Some successfully crossed the border, some were turned back by the Chinese authorities, and some made a separate peace with the Russians. Pynchon is again correct about the rumours that Turkish, Austrian and German agents were encouraging rebellion, particularly a pan-Islamic jihad (holy war) against the Russian infidels (75, 147).

Pynchon does not mention the cause of the uprising, nor does he give any details which might confuse his main account of the genocidal treatment of the natives. He says nothing, for instance, of the two thousand settlers killed by the Kirghiz (120), just as he stays silent elsewhere about the numbers killed by the Herero in their uprising. In fact the parallels with the Herero war could have been multiplied. The Russians seized herds to undermine the economy of the rebels (127), just as the Germans impounded the Herero cattle, and Kuropatkin's directive to the governor of Semirechie province, in its encouragement to slaughter natives, resembles Von Trotha's notorious "extermination order" which is referred to in V.

The densely packed paragraph on the 1916 rising (GR, 340, Viking/Picador eds.) predisposes the reader against the Russian authorities before much information is released about the literacy programme, and suggests yet another analogy. One of the key changes which has taken place between 1916 and the alphabetization campaign is Russia's shift from Tsarist to Soviet rule. Pynchon cannily neglects to mention this change, thereby hinting that the two events are similar members of a series. Each is the manifestation of the totalitarian power of Moscow, the one from the Duma, the other from the "Georgian" (Stalin), whose "current" enthusiasm for ethnic minorities is, if anything, just as threatening as the more open violence of 1916. Hence

Džaqyp Qulan's perfectly justified wariness towards Tchitcherine, although it is important to recognize that the paragraph is only ostensibly memory; it very quickly goes beyond what information might have been available to Džaqyp Qulan at the time. Pynchon probably draws on Sokol for the early Soviet attitude (largely favourable) towards the 1916 uprising (170), but discounts its importance as a temporary and arbitrary shift within a monolithic system of tyranny. The stylistic "coding" of this paragraph in the idiom of the Wild West ("thousands of restless natives bit the dust") relates the treatment of the Kirghiz and other races to the fate of the Argentine Indians, where the same comparison is drawn, and of course to the obliteration of the North American Indian.

Sokol's monograph also sheds some light on the role of Chu Piang, the Chinese factotum who smokes opium secretly with Tchitcherine. Given his position, he is almost certainly a Dungan, i.e., a Chinese Moslem. Sokol explains that one of the Dungans' grievances in 1916 was over the "opium duty":

While opium was cultivated by these people before the war . . . this cultivation formed only a small part of their crops though an important cash crop. During the war, however, because of the need of this drug for the front, the Tsarist government forced them to cultivate the poppy seed exclusively and at prices that were very low; the buying of the crop was placed in the hands of the Treasury and all other sales were strictly forbidden. . . . Wealthy Dungans did manage, however, to carry on a contraband trade with Western China. (129-30)

We thus have the bizarre spectacle of a second opium trade being carried on, this time across the western boundaries of China. It is very likely that Pynchon had this passage in mind when describing Chu Piang's activities, because they are fitted into a local context of commerce. One of Tchitcherine's suspected contacts is a certain Wimpe, head salesman of a subsidiary of IG Farben, who is particularly interested in developing the opium alkaloids.

At this point Chu Piang is introduced as "a living monument to the success of British trade policy back during the last century" (346).<sup>3</sup> He is a kind of historical relic and has been converted into a quaint exhibit for European tourists. The clinical language of the guide ("His Need, you will notice, retains its shape under all manner of stresses" . . . etc.) implies that Chu Piang has become a case or a phenomenon. Pynchon identifies his specific addiction with British commercial exploitation, which is ironically analogous to Sokol's implication that Moscow's interference ruined the Dungan economy.

In this particular section of Gravity's Rainbow, conversations between Tchitcherine and Wimpe frame Chu Piang and set up two contrasting perspectives. Tchitcherine expresses moral reservations about a trade in addiction of which Wimpe is the heir, yet he acts on these scruples to smoke with Chu Piang in an individual act of communion. By contrast Wimpe appeals to "science" for metaphors which justify the anonymous language of profit and loss. For all his minor stature, Chu Piang plays an important part in Pynchon's elaboration of the theme of European exploitation.

Liverpool University

- Notes

<sup>1</sup> Javaid Qazi, "Pynchon in Central Asia: The Use of Sources and Resources," Rocky Mountain Review, 34, No. 4 (1980), 229-42.

<sup>2</sup> Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1954 (The Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science Series, 71, No. 1). Page references will be incorporated into the text.

<sup>3</sup> Editors' Note: Pynchon's reference is to one of the more grisly episodes of nineteenth century colonialism, the Opium War that Britain waged on China in 1840. The opium trade was illegal and enormously profitable to the British, who shipped the drug from the Indian subcontinent colonies to Hong Kong and Canton. Alarmed by the increases in Chinese addiction, and angered by the lack of import duties, China refused

to legalize the imports. Britain declared war in 1840, and won, thereby legalizing the export of an addictive drug to millions, in the name of sound trade policy.