An Lushan (An Shi) Rebellion

The An Lushan Rebellion (755–763 CE) was an uprising against the Tang dynasty by a rapid succession of four rebel emperors of mixed Turkic-Sogdian ethnicity, whose ancestors came from present-day Uzbekistan. The event generated a rich cultural heritage recounting the devastation of the country, and it romanticized the folly of Emperor Xuanzong and his beloved imperial concubine Yang.

On 16 December 755 CE, An Lushan (703–757), or Rokshan (Persian for “light”), swept south from Fanyang (today’s Beijing region) with a multiethnic army of 150,000–200,000 troops (Xi, Malgal, Tongra, Khitan, and Chinese) and mounted a catastrophic rebellion against Tang dynasty China (618–907) in the name of a new dynasty, Yan. In the next seven years the Tang capitals of Chang’an and Luoyang were occupied by a rapid succession of four rebel emperors of mixed Turkic-Sogdian ethnicity (An Lushan and his son An Qingxu and Shi Siming and his son Shi Chaoyi), whose ancestors came from present-day Uzbekistan and spoke a Persian (Iranian) language. The An Lushan Rebellion was more than a significant military event in Tang China; in literary and artistic circles it generated a rich cultural heritage that recounted the devastation of the country and romanticized the tragedy and folly of Emperor Xuanzong (reigned 712–756) and his beloved imperial concubine Yang (719–756), who had formerly been the wife of one of his sons.

This tomb figure of a warrior, in pottery painted with color and gold, from the end of the seventh century (Tang dynasty) is in the collection of the Historical Museum, Xi’an, Shaanxi Province. The features of this Tang warrior’s face suggest that he was descended at least partially from Central Asian forebears; military armor such as this figure wears was in use at the time of the An Lushan Rebellion. PHOTO BY JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.
Chinese primary and secondary sources vilify An Lushan as a semi-sinicized military governor of three strategic provinces in the northeast (Pinglu, Fanyang, and Hebei) whose rebellion brought widespread famine and deaths by the millions. The narrative is focused on the palace spectacle, where the obese and exotic-looking An Lushan had first convinced Emperor Xuanzong of his loyalty to the Tang throne through over a decade of frontier defense against the border peoples. When summoned to the Tang court, An Lushan entertained the women of the court while dressed as a baby and was adopted as a son by the imperial concubine Yang. Her cousin, Prime Minister Yang Guozhong, repeatedly warned that An Lushan harbored a seditious intent, and indeed An Lushan rebelled, and his forces quickly cut off access to the Grand Canal, the economic lifeline that connected the economies of the north and the south. The rebellion drove Emperor Xuanzong and his entourage to seek refuge in Sichuan, but at the Mawei postal station his soldiers executed Yang Guozhong and forced the suicide of the imperial concubine Yang, whom they blamed for provoking An Lushan and plunging the country into civil war. Xuanzong abdicated in favor of his son Suzong (reigned 756–762), who enlisted the assistance of the Uighur cavalry to crush the rebels. Both emperors died before the rebellion came to a conclusion in January 763, when the
much-diminished Tang dynasty allowed the rebel generals, previously connected with An Lushan, to retain their military governorships in the northeast.

**Origins of the Rebellion**

Scholarship in the West has produced translations of An Lushan’s biography in the official histories and probed deeper into the political and military developments that led to the rebellion. A patron of the arts and literature, Emperor Xuanzong has been credited with Tang’s golden age of peace and prosperity at home and abroad until the rebellion occurred. He is blamed for supporting his prime minister, Li Linfu (d. 752), whose political and military reforms in 736–752 weakened the central government and gave rise to regionalism and separatism in the northeast provinces, the base for An Lushan’s operations. In 749 Li dealt a death blow to the cost-effective fubing (garrison soldiery) system of soldier-cultivators, in which soldiers farmed the land in the growing season and at other times undertook military exercises and tours of duty at the capitals and the frontiers. Expenditures were kept low as the soldier-cultivators provided for their own food, equipment, and horses in return for larger land allocations and exemption from taxes and unpaid public labor. The garrison soldiery system was totally replaced by a professional army, accounting for the largest single expenditure of the central government because salaries, food, and equipment were now state expenses. Eighty-five percent of these career soldiers were placed under military governors, who had large staffs and generous funds to direct the loyalty of their soldiers to themselves rather than to the Tang throne. Contrary to the tradition of selecting military governors from the aristocracy and bureaucracy, Li Linfu appointed non-Chinese career military officers to the frontier provinces to carry out an aggressive and precarious foreign policy. In 751 Gao Xianzhi, a Tang general of Korean ancestry, lost the Battle of Talas (in Kyrgyzstan) to the Arabs, after which Tang China relinquished control over Tashkent and Ferghana in central Asia. An Lushan and Shi Siming, career military men from the Turkic-Sogdian disporic communities in Beijing, benefited enormously from Li Linfu’s military policies and exploited the discontent of the northeast population against the Tang dynasty’s discriminatory measures. The military governors were in charge of the civil and military administration, and as they increased the size of their armies, their provinces also became new centers of trade. Rebellion was ripe in the northeast provinces, which had a direct invasion route to Luoyang and were located closer than the Tang capitals to the rich south.

**Outcome of the Rebellion**

The Tibetans and Uighurs were the winners in the rebellion. The Tibetans saw the opportunity to dominate the provinces of Gansu and Ningxia when the Tang
government withdrew frontier troops to defend the capitals. In 760 the Tibetan king, Trisong Detsen (reigned 755–797), invaded Sichuan Province and exacted annual payments of silk from Tang China; in late 763 he charged into Chang’an and installed a pretender to the Tang throne. The Uighurs, who had earlier assisted the Tang dynasty with troops and horses to crush the rebel forces, now drove the Tibetans out and were paid with princess brides and a lucrative horse trade.

The Tang dynasty survived the rebellion but never recovered its external prestige and internal stability. The central government accepted the autonomy of the northeast provinces and lost 25 to 30 percent of the tax base. The financial structure of the dynasty had collapsed during the rebellion, and the taxation system had to be overhauled by 780, when the poll tax in kind (grain, cloth, corvee [labor]), based on the number of people in the household, was replaced with a twice-yearly tax payable in cash. The southward shift of population from the war-torn northeast to the Huai and Yangzi regions gave new importance to the central and southern parts of the country as the chief source of revenue for the central government.

The rebellion was a turning point in the history of Tang China in that the dynasty never recovered its strength and prestige, and the dynasty survived only with drastic changes to the provincial administration and tax systems.

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Further Reading

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