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THE TRANSCASPIAN EPISODE

Operations in Central Asia (1918-1919)

By COLONEL C. H. ELLIS, C.M.G., C.B.E., T.D.

Report of a lecture delivered to the Royal Central Asian Society on Wednesday, February 4, 1959, Group-Captain H. St. Clair Smallwood, O.B.E., in the chair.

The CHAIRMAN: Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,—My first duty is to apologize for the absence of the Chairman of Council, Sir Hugh Dow; unfortunately also our Vice-Chairman, Mr. Southwell, is leaving London tomorrow morning and is unable to be with us. However, it is a great pleasure to me to introduce Colonel Ellis, who was many years ago a member of the Society until having to go to distant countries he dropped out for a while. He has, however, rejoined and we are in the happy position of having our meeting addressed by a member of the Society.

As you all know, the Australian continent is responsible for sending a great many men to our wars, and Colonel Ellis was among all those from down under who came to the rescue of the Old Country in both World Wars. During the First World War he saw service in France and India, and was a member of the Malleston Mission to Meshed and Central Asia in 1918-19. While that may seem a long time ago, it is really a matter of great current interest because the Russians have never ceased to attach significance to it and are always referring to it as an instance of British Imperialism. I now leave Colonel Ellis to speak of the Transcaspiian Episode.

I HAVE been asked to speak this afternoon about the Transcaspiian Episode—the operations in Transcaspiia in 1918-19. This episode, regarded as a military operation, was a comparatively minor affair. Not more than a few hundred officers and men were involved, and the scale of operations was little more than that of the sort of "side-show" that used to take place on the N.W. Frontier of India.

It attracted little attention at the time—in this country—and little has been heard of it since then, except in the Soviet Union where the memory of the affair has been kept alive.

It may be asked, then, what purpose there is in reviving the memory of a small military side-show which took place some 40 years ago? There are, I think, several reasons why it is worth re-telling. First of all, the episode took place in a part of the world that is of great strategic importance. In the past, when we were responsible for the defence of India, Central Asia or rather Russian Turkestan, was the area whence the threat to the security of India seemed likely to come. Russian advances towards Afghanistan were regarded as a threat to our interests in India and the Middle East area generally. Now that we are no longer responsible for the defence of the Indian peninsula, in a military sense, the names of places like Merv, Tedjend, Kushkh, no longer figure in press reports and House of Commons debates, but the area has not lost its special significance as a strategic area of great importance in the light of the growing nationalism and industrial development of Asia. Secondly, during the course of the operations along the Central Asian railway in 1918 and 1919, several incidents occurred, one in particular—I refer to the case of the 26 Com-



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missars—which have given rise to much controversy, and in the Soviet Union are still the subject of much misrepresentation and hostile comment, as well as propaganda.

During the past few years a number of books have appeared in the Soviet Union in which this episode, as well as others, have been treated as examples of British "imperialism," and have been distorted and embellished for propaganda purposes. These books are sometimes quoted in publications overseas as sources of information about the events of that time. For that reason alone, it is I think useful to have the facts restated by someone who has personal knowledge and experience of the episode.

At the end of 1917, the war situation for the Allies had entered upon a critical stage. In the West, the heavy losses in manpower incurred during the fighting on the Somme in the autumn of 1916, and in Flanders during the summer of 1917, had placed a severe strain on Allied resources. The Italian setback at Caporetto, and the defeat of Roumania after a short campaign, gave hope and encouragement to the Central Powers. On the Russian front, little progress had been made after the February revolution. Many weary months were to elapse before the entry of the United States into the war began to make itself felt on the fighting fronts.

The seizure of power by the Bolsheviks in October, 1917, was quickly followed by the disintegration of the Russian Army, and Russian withdrawal from the war. The Russian collapse not only freed German manpower for transfer to the West, but also opened the way for both German and Turkish penetration of the Caucasus and an advance into Persia and Central Asia. Such an advance constituted a threat, not only to British forces operating against Turkey in Mesopotamia, but also to India. A hostile, if not actively belligerent Afghanistan (already subjected to Turkish and German propaganda), would pin down large numbers of British and Indian troops, which could be more usefully employed elsewhere.

The armistice on the Russo-Turkish front was almost immediately followed by the withdrawal in disorder of the Russian Army, its arms and equipment being abandoned to the enemy or falling into the hands of revolutionary groups in Transcaucasia. Two Russian columns in Persia, one operating in the N.W. in co-operation with the British Army in Mesopotamia, and the other in East Persia, were also withdrawn, leaving the Mesopotamian right flank exposed and removing the barrier to the penetration of enemy agents into Afghanistan and Central Asia.

With the conclusion of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, the Germans entered into a separate agreement with Ukrainian Rada, occupying the Ukraine and the Crimea and thus gaining a mastery of the Black Sea and the Caucasian coastal littoral. A German column entered the Caucasus at Poti, and having reached an agreement with the Georgians who had declared their independence of Russia, occupied Tiflis. Turkish forces occupied Kars and Batum and began their advance through Armenia into Azerbaijan and N. Persia.

The aim of the German command was mainly to secure Baku oil and the vast store of Turkestan cotton, both urgently needed for war purposes,

while threatening the vulnerable British flank in Persia and, via Afghanistan, India. Turkish aims seemed to be mainly directed towards the fulfilment of pan-Turanian plans for uniting the Turkish-speaking and Moslem peoples of Azerbaijan and Turkestan under the flags of Turkey and the Caliphate.

Despite some conflict of aims between Germans and Turks̄, there was sufficient unity and co-ordination of effort between them to enable them to continue their advance unless some effective resistance could "be organized among those elements in Transcaucasia and (as was hoped, at that time) in Turkestan, who might be willing and able to impede their passage.

The existence of some 35,000 Austro-Hungarian and German prisoners of war in Turkestan, the remnant of a far greater number, now freed from restraint, constituted an additional threat to India in the event of an enemy advance along the Central Asian railway from Krasnovodsk.

- In Turkestan a confused situation had developed about which little was accurately known. A Soviet, mainly Bolshevik in character but supported by Menshevik and Social Revolutionary groups, consisting of railway workers and returned soldiers and entirely Russian in its composition, had seized power in Tashkent and other local centres of Russian population, including the Transcaspiian town of Merv, Ashkhabad and Krasnovodsk. The Tashkent Soviet, proclaiming its authority over the whole region, arrested or shot representatives and ex-officials of the Tsarist and Provisional Government régimes, and established an impoverished administration in those centres where there was a substantial Russian population. Ignoring a declaration made in Petrograd in November, 1917, which invited the Moslem population of Russia to organize their own affairs and establish, if they so desired, autonomous administrations, the Tashkent Soviet excluded representatives of the native population (which comprised more than 90 per cent. of the total population of Turkestan) from any part in the administration and public services. Cut off from central Russia by a Cossack force under the anti-Bolshevik Ataman General Dutov, which had occupied Orenburg, the Tashkent Soviet government acting independently and often without reference to policies proclaimed in Petrograd, adopted a chauvinistic Russian policy towards the native population. An attempt by Moslem native leaders to set up an autonomous régime at Kokand was crushed with great severity by Tashkent Red guards, the city being destroyed and many thousands of the unfortunate inhabitants being massacred. The survivors took refuge in the independent Khanate of Bokhara, or joined the so-called Basmachi bands which were already in revolt against Russian authority in Southern and Eastern Turkestan.

Faced with a revolt of the native population, and threatened by Dutov and other anti-Bolshevik centres of resistance in the North and North-east, the Tashkent Soviet organized a Red Army, consisting partly of railway workers and troops recently withdrawn from Persia or former garrison forces, but mainly of Hungarian prisoners of war who were given the alternative of enlistment or starvation. Although firmly entrenched in Tashkent, where there was a large Russian population and

concentration of troops, the authority of the Soviet was not unquestioned in other centres, particularly in Transcaspia where the rumblings of revolt had already begun to be heard in the spring of 1918. The Turkmen population smarting under what they considered to be the high-handed attitude of the Soviet administration, waited an opportunity to revolt. A deteriorating economic situation caused much dissatisfaction, and the local railway men, mainly S.R. in outlook, and perhaps more concerned than the Tashkent workers with the impending threat from the other side of the Caspian, began to display a resistance to Tashkent policies which culminated in their revolt in June and July.

The failure of the Tashkent Soviet Government to recognize the threat to which they were exposed by the Turkish and German advance can only be explained by the character and inexperience of the men who comprised it. Mostly ex-railway workers, ex-soldiers and petty officials, their ignorance of the outside world was only exceeded by their revolutionary fervour. Ignoring the Turkish threat, already manifesting itself in pan-Islamic propaganda and intrigue, they embarked on a violent "anti-imperialist" and anti-British campaign, taking their cue from declarations made by Soviet spokesmen in Petrograd and Moscow, but also expressing the latent anti-British feeling common to all classes of Russians in Turkestan, the outcome of suspicion and distrust fostered by propaganda in Tzarist times. This atmosphere had been most effectively exploited by German and Turkish agents, and indeed it was largely due to their efforts that the Soviet Russian propensity to attribute all disorder, revolt and deviation from the "official line" in Turkestan to British influence, was reinforced.

It was in the light of these circumstances that the British military authorities, in consultation with London and Simla, decided to send Missions to key points in the Caspian and N. Persia to keep a watch on the rapidly developing situation, and in the event of the Turkish and German forces reaching the Caspian coast, to organize such local resistance to their further advance as was possible. In addition to these Missions, a further Mission was planned to proceed via Kashgar to Tashkent to establish contact with the local Soviet government and ascertain what steps, if any, could be taken to deny the use of the Central Asian railway and cotton supplies to the enemy.

The first of these missions was "Dunsterforce," a small group of officers and men under the command of Major General Dunsterville, with a convoy of armoured cars, which left Bagdad for Enzeli via Hamadan early in January, 1918. The column followed closely in the wake of the retreating Russians, part of which force, a group of several hundred Cossacks under General Bicharakov, had remained behind, having refused to obey the order to withdraw to Transcaspia.

The aim of the Dunsterville Mission was to secure the road to Enzeli, and report on Turkish moves in the direction of Tabriz and developments in the situation in Baku, while at the same time to establish contact with friendly elements in Transcaucasia who were willing and able to resist the Turkish advance towards the Caspian.

At this stage there was uncertainty regarding the situation in Trans-

caucasia. It was known that the Turks had formed a new "Army of Islam" under General Nuri Pasha, and that this army, which had already established contact with Moslem leaders in Azerbaijan and Daghestan, was advancing towards Baku while another Turkish column was proceeding towards Tabriz. German and Turkish forces were in command of the railways leading eastwards from Erzerum and Batum. In the Persian province of Gilan, a revolutionary band known as the Jangalis, officered by Turks and Austrians, blocked the road to Enzeli, acting as a "Fifth column" for the Turkish Army marching eastward.

At Baku, where there was a large Russian and Armenian population consisting largely of oil and railway workers, a Soviet government had assumed power, but had little authority outside the city area, where the Azerbaijan "Tatar" population, although somewhat divided in its loyalties, were largely under Turkish influence. Krasnovodsk, on the eastern shore of the Caspian, and the terminus of the Central Asian railway was in Tashkent Soviet hands. The merchant fleet, or that portion of it that was in southern Caspian harbours, wavered in its loyalties, but on the whole, seemed to favour resistance to the Turks.

In Baku and in the railway towns of Transcaspia, opposition to Bolshevik control was, however, developing. Conflicts between the various national groups—in Baku, Armenian Dashnaks and Azerbaijan Mussavists, S.R.s and Bolsheviks—and in Transcaspia, Social Revolutionaries, Mensheviks and Bolsheviks, railwaymen and Tashkent bureaucrats, as well as Turkmen and Russians, absorbed the attention of the local population more than the threat of Turko-German invasion. The Armenians of Baku were perhaps more apprehensive than others, being fully aware of the fate in store for them should the Turks occupy Baku.

This confused situation resolved itself in Baku early in July, when the non-Bolshevik groups succeeded in removing the Communists from office, and set up a new government under the title of the "Centro-Caspian Directorate." This government, in which Dashnaks and S.R.s predominated, finally becoming fully alive to the implications of the Turkish advance, established contact with General Dunsterville, whose little force had at last reached Enzeli, after defeating the Jangalis and reaching a provisional agreement with a locally formed Russian Soviet in Resht and Enzeli.

The Centro-Caspian Directorate sought the assistance of General Dunsterville in men and equipment for the training and organizing of a defence force, and undertook in return to co-operate with him in steps to prevent the oil and cotton resources falling into enemy hands. The force at General Dunsterville's disposal, although reinforced by several companies of infantry, some artillery and sapper units, was quite inadequate to undertake alone a full-scale defence of Baku. By agreement between the Baku authorities and General Dunsterville, General Bicharakov's Cossacks had been shipped to Baku to part of the line of defence, and in early August a small reconnaissance party of officers visited Baku.

After some hesitation on the part of his military chiefs in Bagdad, General Dunsterville was authorized to take part of his force to Baku, which he proceeded to do after taking steps to secure possession of several

ships of the Caspian merchant fleet as a precautionary measure. An agreement was reached with the C.C.D. whereby Dunsterville undertook, for the period of hostilities, to support the C.C.D. with equipment, with training units, and a limited number of men and guns, the Baku authorities undertaking in return to establish a unified command, and to mobilize all available resources for the defence of the city. At the same time, the British Commander, by agreement with the crews, secured control of the Caspian fleet, consisting of a number of small armed vessels, for which purpose a naval officer, Capt. D. Norris, and a few naval ratings were sent from naval units in the Persian Gulf.

Hopes of being able to organize an effective defence of the city, however, were to be disappointed. Although sufficient troops and military equipment were available, it was found impossible to achieve unity of command or adequate supply services. Lack of discipline and unwillingness to fight were displayed by both Russian and Armenian troops; cohesion was absent and treachery and cowardice in the face of the enemy facilitated the advance of the Turks who pressed their attack resolutely. In the defence, most of the fighting fell to the handful of British troops, whose casualties were heavy.

The advance of the Turkish force, assisted by about 10,000 Azerbaijan volunteers, had been held up on account of differences between the Turkish and German commands. Following discussions between the Soviet and German governments, held in Berlin, the Germans had undertaken to stop the Turkish advance on Baku in return for deliveries of Baku oil. When this became known in Constantinople, Enver Pasha ordered an immediate attack on the city.

By mid-September, it was clear that Baku could not be held; the British Commander therefore decided to withdraw his forces. Amid scenes of chaos and confusion, he re-embarked the remnant of the British force and retired to Enzeli.

While these events were in progress, a considerable change in the situation had taken place in Transcaspiia. Conflicts between the different political groups in Transcaspiia, to which reference has already been made, came to a head in June, when an order for the registration of all males, for mobilization purposes, was issued by the Tashkent Soviet. Railway workers at Kizyl Arvat and Ashkhabad, supported by other anti-Communist elements, organized meetings of protests, and disorderly scenes took place in these and other towns. A visit to the area by the chief Commissar in Tashkent, Kolesov, failed to pacify the railwaymen. Kolesov's visit was followed by the arrival of another Commissar, Frolov, together with a Red Guard bodyguard. Frolov instituted a reign of terror, shooting a number of people, including several railway workers. Under the impression that he had suppressed the threatened revolt in Ashkhabad, he proceeded to Kizyl Arvat, where he shot a deputation of railway workers out of hand. Overpowered by the railwaymen, he was himself shot, and those of his bodyguard who escaped a similar fate, went over to the railwaymen.

Frolov's death was followed by a revolt against the Bolsheviks in Krasnovodsk, Ashkhabad and Merv, the chief Transcaspiian centres. A

Transcaspians Provincial Government, consisting of S.R.s, some Mensheviks, representatives of the railwaymen, and several local officials, with the support of the local Turkmen, took over the administration in Merv and Krasnovodsk. A number of Bolshevik Commissars and officials were shot in these and other centres, followed by the usual atrocities which at that time were common practice on both sides.

Having burnt their boats by their action against the Bolsheviks, the Transcaspians Government proceeded to organize a line of defence on the Central Asian railway, in the vicinity of Chardjui, where the railway crosses the Amu Darya (Oxus) river. This military force consisted, at this stage, of a few ex-officers and men formerly belonging to the garrison or to units withdrawn from Persia, some Armenian volunteers, and a few hundred Russian volunteers from Ashkhabad and Kizyl Arvat. The local Turkmen, who had been disarmed by the Bolsheviks, were rearmed, with some trepidation, by the Provisional Government, and were induced by promises of recognition of their rights to support the government and provide a cavalry force at the front. The command of the army was entrusted to Colonel Oraz Sirdar, a Tekke Turkman who had served with distinction in the Tzarist Army, thus ensuring the loyalty of the Turkmen horsemen.

The Tashkent Soviet was not slow to respond to the challenge. Early in August, a force of Red Guards, mainly Hungarians, attacked the Transcaspians force, compelling its retirement some 100 miles to Bairam Ali, a small town 30 miles east of Merv. While both sides brought up reinforcements mainly in the form of armoured trains, the Transcaspians Government, faced with the realities of the situation, cast about for support.

Several weeks after the shooting of Frolov, and the establishment of the Transcaspians Provisional Government, a British Mission under the command of Major-General W. Malleon arrived at Meshed in Persian Khorosan from India. After the withdrawal of Russian troops from the northern section of the East Persian Cordon, as the Anglo-Russian screening force was known, British-Indian cavalry took over the Russian section, and a line of communications from the Baluchistan railhead at Nushki to Birjand was established. The objectives of the Mission (known as Malmiss) were mainly of an exploratory character. With no troops at his disposal other than a bodyguard and units of L—C troops of the Cordon force, the Malmiss Mission was precariously located in the event of a Turkish advance into Persia or across the Caspian. Apart from exploratory duties, General Malleon was authorized, at his discretion, to establish contact with groups and individuals in Transcaspians who were likely to be co-operative in denying the Central Asian railway and Krasnovodsk to the Turks in the event of the latter seizing Baku. He was given a free hand to undertake such sabotage operations along the railway as were feasible in this event, operations which were obviously unlikely to be successfully undertaken without local collaboration.

Events in Baku and Ashkhabad now provided grounds for hope that such co-operation might be achieved. When, therefore, the Transcaspians Government approached him in mid-August with a request for assistance,

General Malleson was placed in a position to bargain for their undertaking to co-operate in the mining of Krasnovodsk harbour, and to take steps to ensure that the railway would not be available for a Turkish advance, should this threat materialize. The Transcaspians required military equipment, medical and other stores, and some officers for training purposes, and put in a plea for the provision of troops, which Malleson, at that stage, was unable to satisfy. An agreement, along these lines, was reached on August 19, more than a month after the Ashkhabad revolt had taken place. The agreement, which was of a provisional character, was confirmed by Malleson's military chiefs in Simla, who, however, appeared to have little knowledge or understanding of the real state of affairs in the area. (N.B. Simla was at this time more concerned with the state of affairs in Afghanistan and the N.E. Frontier, and appeared to be more interested in reports reaching its Headquarters from Kashgar and Kabul than from N. Persia and the Caspian.)

Following the signing of the agreement with the British Mission, the Ashkhabad Government took steps to strengthen its military command, while reorganizing its own functions. Funtikov, the Chairman of the Provisional Government (an ex-railwayman), reduced the numbers of the "Cabinet," which now consisted of Zimen, a Merv schoolmaster, one Count Dorrer, a S.R. who had escaped from Tashkent, two other railwaymen, Belov and Kurilov, and Obez Baev, a Turkman.

None of these, with the possible exception of Dorrer, had any administrative experience. Although regarding themselves as revolutionaries, they were compelled by circumstances to abjure many ideas they shared with the Bolsheviks. They had no clear pattern of thought on political and economic issues, and were basically suspicious of each other. Faced with the problems of government and defence, they were forced to rely to a considerable extent on the advice and experience of ex-officials and ex-officers of the Tsarist and Kerensky régimes, who at least had some organizing ability and capacity for translating theory into action. The need to concede some liberty of action to the Turkmen, some of the leaders of whom were vaguely pro-Turk, and practically all imbued with anti-Russian sentiment, was a further source of embarrassment.

A small party of Indian troops belonging to the 19th Punjabi Regiment, with several machine guns, joined the Transcaspians at Dushakh, a station west of Bairam Ali, to which it had been compelled to retreat by a further Red Army attack. Following a sharp but inconclusive engagement at Dushakh, a further retirement took place at Kaakha, a few miles further west, where the Transcaspians, in response to an urgent appeal from Ashkhabad to General Malleson, were reinforced by additional units of the 19th Punjabis. In the fierce battle that ensued, heavy casualties were incurred on both sides, but the Transcaspians and Indian troops held their ground, and after further fighting in September, in which armoured trains played a large part, the Red Army was forced to withdraw to Dushakh. Some British infantry belonging to the Hampshire Regiment and a Battery of Field Artillery arrived about this time from Dunsterville's field column at Enzeli. The addition of field artillery, in which arm the Transcaspians were very weak, to some extent counter-balanced the poor

quality of the Transcaspiian troops. The Turkmen cavalry was undisciplined and unreliable, and the infantry showed a strong tendency to keep to the shelter of the armoured trains. In September, three squadrons of the 28th Indian Cavalry arrived from Meshed in time for the heavy fighting which took place during the latter part of September and in October, following which a general retirement of the Red forces beyond the Merv Oasis took place.

The temporary loss of Merv and the rich agricultural land of the oasis, the principal source of food supply to Transcaspiia, had caused great hardship to the population, and was the chief underlying cause of the unrest and agitation against the government which followed in the late autumn. The reoccupation of the Oasis in October and November eased the situation, but financial difficulties and political conflicts between the Menshevik and Social Revolutionary elements in the governments and Trades Unions precipitated a crisis towards the end of the year, which was only resolved by the provision of financial assistance by the British Mission, a reorganization of the government, henceforth known as the "Committee of Public Safety," and the arrest by the Ashkhabad authorities of a number of agitators who were suspected of sympathy with the Bolsheviks.

At the time of the fighting at Kaakha and in subsequent operations in the Merv area, the total Transcaspiian strength, including Turkmen, was less than 2,000. British and Indian troops, in addition, numbered about 900, a third of which number were on lines of communication. Both sides used armoured trains, mounted with guns of various calibres and vintages, and protected by bales of cotton. The Red trains, at the beginning of military operations, had the advantage of possessing guns of heavier calibre and longer range; an adequate supply of ammunition was obtained from the large store of military equipment at the frontier fortress of Kushkh, which remained in Bolshevik hands throughout the fighting.

With the onset of winter, one of great severity with temperatures below zero, a period of stalemate developed, punctuated by sporadic armoured train duels and occasional raiding attacks by the Red forces, which were invariably driven off.

Despite the disparity in numbers and equipment, the Transcaspiians had gained the initiative by the autumn, but largely owing to the economic and political difficulties with which the Ashkhabad government were faced, the tendency to intrigue and talk rather than act with resolution, and the lack of any clear policy other than to play for time while depending on British support, the military command was unable to use it to advantage.

The fighting qualities of the Indian troops were fully appreciated by the Tashkent Soviet. Their own troops were of unequal quality, the Hungarian ex-prisoners, buoyed up by hopes of fighting their way through to the Caspian, displaying great courage and fortitude. It was only after the removal of the "plug" at Orenburg, where Dutov's Cossacks, with varying success had blocked the road to Moscow, that the Tashkent Soviet Army, reinforced by Red Army units and military equipment from Central Russia, was able to take the offensive with any hope of success.

It was during this period of fluctuating fortune and domestic unrest that the episode of the 26 Commissars took place. This incident, which became an international *cause célèbre*, stemmed from actions taken by the Centro-Caspian Directorate during the evacuation from Baku in September. Bolshevik members of the previous Baku Soviet Government, and a number of Bolshevik officials had been arrested by the C.C.D. in July, and were awaiting trial on charges of treachery and misappropriation of State property when the Turkish attack on Baku took place on September 14.

Released from prison by the government, or what seems more likely, by friendly hands, the Commissars, 26 in number, took ship to proceed to Astrakhan, which was in Soviet Government hands.

On the pretext of having insufficient fuel, or possibly because of some uncertainty in their minds as to what fate awaited them in Astrakhan, the crew took the ship to Krasnovodsk, where it arrived early on the following morning. The Ashkhabad Government official in charge of the Krasnovodsk administration, one Kuhn, arrested the party of Commissars, and telegraphed to Ashkhabad for instructions. The Transcaspien Government, disturbed by developments in Baku as well as local unrest, notified General Malleon in Meshed through their liaison officer, Dokhov, of the arrival of the Commissars and sought his views. General Malleon informed Dokhov that he considered it most undesirable that the Commissars should be allowed to proceed along the railway, or be brought to Ashkhabad, and suggested that the most prudent course would be to hand them over to the British Mission at some convenient point, whence they could be sent to India and held as hostages for a number of British citizens then being detained by the Bolshevik Government in Moscow and elsewhere. Dokhov undertook to convey General Malleon's suggestions to his chiefs in Ashkhabad, but expressed some personal doubt as to its feasibility.

General Malleon, having little confidence in Dokhov, then telegraphed to his own liaison officer in Ashkhabad, Captain Teague Jones, instructing him to convey the same message to the government through Zimen, the L.O.'s contact with that body.

The government, consisting of Funtikov, Zimen, Kurilov and Dorrer, spent the following night discussing the question without reaching a unanimous decision. In the meanwhile, Kuhn, evidently fearing an attempt on the part of local sympathisers to release the Commissars from custody, telegraphed Funtikov, asking for an immediate decision. While it is uncertain whether the final decision was left to Funtikov by the other members of the government (their subsequent efforts to dissociate themselves from the action taken having little value as evidence), instructions were in fact given by him to Kuhn to shoot the unfortunate prisoners.

On the night of September 19, the 26 Commissars were taken by train to a point in the desert about 200 kilometres east of Krasnovodsk and there shot in circumstances of great brutality.

The Ashkhabad Government took steps to prevent the news of this action reaching the public, and it was only after repeated requests for information that General Malleon's liaison officer was able to elicit from

the government information on what had happened. On being informed, General Malleon, who in the meanwhile had obtained the approval of his chiefs in India to his suggestion to hold the Commissars as hostages, expressed his strong disapproval and horror at the action taken by the Ashkhabad Government.

News of the fate of the Commissars does not appear to have become known in Moscow until February or March in the new year, but in the meanwhile, late in September, there was some correspondence through neutral channels, between M. Chicherin and H.M. Government, regarding their whereabouts. At that time, however, H.M. Government had not yet received news of the fate of the Commissars, as Malleon's direct communications were with Simla, and delays in the transmission of all but urgent telegrams were not uncommon.

The fate of the Commissars, however, became the subject of articles in a Baku newspaper, early in March, 1919, and subsequently the theme of a book by one Vadim Chaikin, a Social Revolutionary journalist who had visited Transcaspia. In these publications, Chaikin charged the British with the execution of the 26 Commissars, placing the blame squarely on the shoulders of officers of the British Mission. The fact that no representative of the Mission was in Krasnovodsk, and that Kuhn took his orders from the Ashkhabad Government, was ignored.

Chaikin's charges were repeated in a Soviet wireless broadcast in April, the Soviet Government bluntly accusing the British of being responsible for the transportation of the Commissars to Krasnovodsk, their arrest and subsequent execution. The statements contained in Chaikin's book were quoted in evidence, and the charge has been repeated many times in numerous publications, and in internal and external propaganda since that date.

The fate of the 26 Commissars, by no means an isolated incident of callous brutality committed by both "Reds" and "Whites" during those years of internal struggle and confusion, has become part of the Soviet revolutionary epic, and it now seems unlikely that an objective and unprejudiced restatement of the facts will be included in Soviet historical accounts of events in Turkestan in the foreseeable future.

The collapse of the Central Powers in October and November inevitably brought about a change in the political and military situation throughout the whole Caspian area. The reoccupation of Baku by British forces after a short period of Turkish occupation, following the Turkish attack on the city in mid-September, removed the danger of aggression from that quarter, so that British involvement in operations in Transcaspia could no longer be justified by reasons of military expediency. Early in the New Year, British troops in the area came under the command of the Commander-in-Chief, Black Sea Forces, General Milne, who was also responsible for troops in occupation of the Transcaucasian railway between Batum and Baku. German troops had withdrawn through the Ukraine, and Turkish units, scattered throughout the area, were with difficulty being extricated from their various locations. The sudden collapse of the Central Powers, however, left in its train an extremely complicated and confused situation in Transcaucasia and the Caspian area

generally, delaying the disengagement of British forces for some months.

Following a visit to the Transcaspian front by General Milne in January, 1919, and consultations with London and Simla, the decision was taken to withdraw the British-Indian forces from Transcaspia. The danger of too sudden a withdrawal was, however, recognized, and in fairness to the Ashkhabad Government, and above all to the Turkmen who looked to the British for support, it was felt that they should be given the opportunity to obtain alternative support from the Caucasus, where General Denikin's troops had established themselves in the northern area.

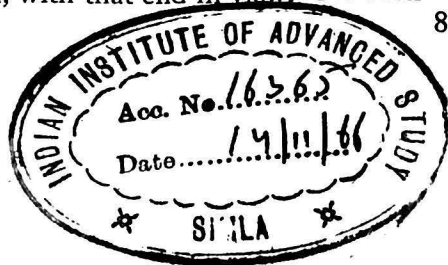
Preparations for withdrawal were put in train and the Ashkhabad Government was informed in confidence of the intended move. Meanwhile, rumours of an impending encircling movement by a reinforced British force were put into circulation to forestall an early attack by the Tashkent Army; military stores and equipment were made available to the Transcaspians, and some rifles and ammunition sent, at his urgent request, to the Emir of Bokhara, whose forces, woefully inadequate, at least constituted a threat to the Red Army flank. (N.B. Contrary to subsequent Soviet charges, no British officers were sent to Bokhara, nor was any political or military agreement entered into with the ruler of that unruly State.)

By the beginning of March, all British and Indian troops were withdrawn, either to Meshed or via Ashkhabad, to Baku. Meanwhile, officers and men, mainly Daghestan cavalry, had arrived from Petrovsk, and the military command became subordinate to General Denikin.

No move was made by Tashkent until May, by which time news of the British withdrawal had become definitely known, or the danger of a flank attack was discovered to be a stratagem. Although heavily reinforced from the Caucasus, the Transcaspian Army was unable to withstand the Red Army attack, and fell back on Merv, which after a short respite was abandoned, the Transcaspians retiring in disorder in the direction of Ashkhabad. Ashkhabad fell in July; Kizyl Arvat a few weeks later, and a general retirement then took place to Krasnovodsk, which held out until the end of the year when the remnant of the defending force surrendered or was evacuated to the Caucasus. Few of the Ashkhabad Government leaders escaped. Oraz Sirdar, with several other Turkmen leaders, took refuge in Persia; others joined the Khivan irregular forces and continued the struggle until the whole of Turkestan was in Bolshevik hands after Frunze's campaign in the following year.

Thus ended the Transcaspian episode. On the British side, begun as an improvisation, on characteristic British Army lines, to deal with a local situation as it arose, it has passed into military history as one of many such episodes, a forgotten campaign.

In Soviet accounts, dealing with the history of the period in Turkestan, the British rôle is presented as part of a vast plan to subjugate Turkestan, to make that vast area a British "colony," and gain possession of its resources of oil, cotton and manpower. Many of these accounts speak of a "Pact" alleged to have been entered into with some mysterious and unspecified "White" organization, with that end in view. No such "Pact"



ever existed, except in the imagination of some fanciful journalist, or as a piece of propaganda which aimed, for internal purposes, at providing a convenient explanation for the situation brought about by the excesses and mistakes of the Tashkent Soviet and its alienation of the Moslem population from the Bolshevik régime.

Most Soviet historical accounts of the campaign in Transcaspia, and Dunsterville's participation in the defence of Baku, show a disposition to ignore or to minimize the fact that war with the Central powers was still in progress, and that it was Allied victory in the West that brought about the collapse of Germany and Turkey, thus removing at one stroke the threat of Turko-German occupation of the Moslem countries of the Middle East, and at the same time lifting the heavy burden of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty.

The CHAIRMAN: Our time is up, but I am happy to say that the paper will be reproduced in full in the Society's Journal so that any omission which has had to be made for lack of time will later be available to all members. I know you will wish to support me in thanking Colonel Ellis very much indeed for his masterly and intensely interesting exposition.

