

SOME NOTES ON RUSSIAN INTRIGUE IN TIBET

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I

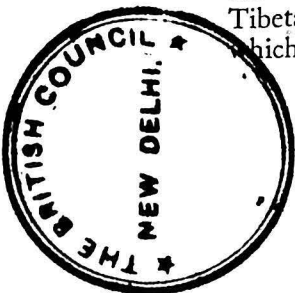
IN a recent article in the Royal Central Asian Journal,¹ P. L. Mehra has performed a service of great value to students of the more recent history of Central Asia by examining afresh the evidence behind those reports of Russian intrigue in Tibet which received so much publicity during the period of the Younghusband Mission to Lhasa of 1904. His article is an admirable survey of the published material relating to this fascinating subject. It does not, however, make use of unpublished documents; and it is for this reason that I venture to write these notes.

The Tibetan policy of Lord Curzon has been the subject of considerable discussion ever since Sir Francis Younghusband entered the gates of Lhasa in August 1904. Much has appeared on this subject in past numbers of the Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society. To date, however, no final conclusions would seem to have been reached on two most important questions. What exactly was the Tibetan policy of Lord Curzon, and what were the motives behind it? What foundation was there for the reports of Russian intrigue in Tibet, and what significance had the activities of Dorjjeff? The second question, requiring research into Russian and Chinese sources, lies outside the scope of this article. On the first question, however, the records of the India Office and Foreign Office throw considerable light, and in several important respects they modify conclusions which might be drawn from the three Tibet Blue Books, the main source of published documentary material on this topic.² It is hoped that in this respect these notes may prove to be of some value.

II

In 1886 the extension of British influence into Tibet was a goal which the Indian Government of Lord Dufferin did not consider to be worth the risk of strained Anglo-Chinese relations because, in part, as Mackenzie Wallace noted in 1887 when discussing the reasons behind the abandonment of the projected Colman Macaulay Mission to Lhasa :

“ At present we ought to aim at establishing cordial relations with China and allaying her suspicions. Any attempt to resuscitate the defunct mission or to bring pressure of any kind to bear on the Tibetans would have a most prejudicial effect on the negotiations which must sooner or later be undertaken for the delimitation



of the Burma-Chinese frontier. Good relations with China can only be obtained by convincing the Chinese that having taken Burma, we have no aggressive intentions, and we should never forget that, apart from the frontier questions just referred to, China is every day becoming a more important factor in the great Eastern Question."³

Nine years later, when the possibility was being considered at the India Office of a British intervention in a dispute between Tibet and Nepal, Lord George Hamilton was able to remark that the attitude of the Chinese was no longer of any importance.⁴ In the years between these two statements the disastrous defeat of China by Japan had altered fundamentally the faith of the Powers in the stability of the Chinese Empire. This change, which was destined to have the gravest consequences in China, was also the underlying factor behind the British policy towards Tibet which took definite shape in the opening years of the Twentieth Century. It resulted in a significant intensification of the Tibetan question which had been developing since 1886.

In 1886 the Tibetans occupied a portion of the State of Sikkim which the British had long grown accustomed to look upon as a part of their Empire in India. In 1888, after many delays, the Tibetans were expelled from this area, and as a consequence of this expulsion the Indian Government found itself embarked upon negotiations with the Chinese as to the status of a British protected state. In these negotiations the main objective of the Indian Government was to make it quite clear that China had no claims over British protected territory. Its intention was to eliminate any shadowy claims which "would have remained on record," so Lansdowne wrote in 1889, "as formal evidence of the success of the Chinese whose reputation, already inconveniently great among our ignorant feudatories, we could not have afforded to increase in this way at our own expense. From one end of the Himalayas to the other we should have weakened our influence. In India it is essential for the stability of our rule that we should permit no attempt at interference by Foreign Powers with any portion of the Empire."⁵ The Sikkim-Tibet Convention of 1890, and its ancillary Trade Regulations of 1893, asserted beyond dispute the British position in Sikkim; but only at the expense of British commerce in Tibet, and by admitting that the Chinese were the sovereign rulers of Tibet. But, as Lansdowne wrote in 1893:

"There is a good deal to be said for coming to terms with the Chinese and not allowing the negotiations to end in nothing. We shall probably before long be engaged in other and far more important negotiations respecting the Pamirs, in which our interests and those of China will be in many respects identical. We shall also very shortly have to deal with the Burmah Decennial Mission—an exceedingly awkward question. It has, therefore, appeared to us worthwhile, under the circumstances, to stretch a point in regard to the Sikkim-Tibet Convention, and we are disposed to regard the arrangement which has now been arrived at . . . as of importance not so much on account of the commercial interests involved, but

as an outward sign of neighbourly good-will prevailing between the two Empires."⁶

As Riseley, the editor of the *Gazetteer of Sikkim*, put it more forcefully in 1894, "who will deny that it would be a piece of surpassing folly to alienate a possible ally in China by forcing our way into Tibet in the interests of scientific curiosity, doubtfully backed by mercantile speculation."⁷

These arguments could not stand in the face of the possibility that the Chinese Empire might disintegrate, and that the Chinese position in Tibet might be taken over by a European Power. Even in 1893, before the Sino-Japanese War, it could hardly be claimed that the Chinese position in Tibet was very secure. Captain H. Bower reported to Military Intelligence in India in that year that the Chinese were of little significance in Tibetan politics. "A power," he wrote, "which is incapable of protecting anyone or applying the most insignificant rules of police, does not deserve the name of a Government." He added that "a very small armed party will suffice to open the gates of the capital of the Dalai Lama." That such an armed party would be Russian, Bower then thought, was very unlikely since "the Tibetan northern frontier is the strongest in the world."⁸

Tibet was separated from the territory of the nearest European Power, Russia, by Chinese Turkestan. From the Indian point of view the greatest danger that would seem to have arisen as a consequence of the Sino-Japanese War lay in the possibility that this buffer territory would fall into eager Russian hands. In March, 1895, the distinguished Colonial judge, Sir E. Hornby, warned Lords Kimberley and Rosebery that Chinese Turkestan would soon fall to the Russians.⁹ In 1896 Sir John Ardagh, Director of Military Intelligence, had come to the same conclusion.¹⁰

III

The possibility that Russia would acquire Chinese Turkestan held immediate dangers for the Indian frontier in the region of the Pamirs and the Karakoram. Here the British frontier had tended to follow the line of the watersheds. Were the Russians to take over Kashgaria they would find themselves in possession of those valleys which led up to the watershed and provided the easy routes by which the British line could be infiltrated. As Ardagh put it:

"For military purposes . . . a frontier following the highest watersheds is defective, and we should aim at keeping our enemy from any possibility of establishing himself in the glacis, occupying those longitudinal valleys, and thus preparing to surprise the passes. We should therefore seek a boundary which shall leave all these longitudinal valleys in our possession, or at least under our influence."

Thus Ardagh argued that the British frontier should lie to the north of the mountains; and, significantly, he added that:

"The same principles and arguments may have to be applied

at some future period to the Upper Basins of the Indus, the Sutlej, and even the Brahmaputra in the event of a prospective absorption of Tibet by Russia. At the present moment, however, we are only concerned in the definition of a frontier between British India and Kashgar Yarkand and Khotan."

On all this Lord Salisbury minuted: "I quite agree with Mr. Curzon that the best plan in this area is to occupy first and negotiate afterwards."¹¹

In 1898 Sir John Ardagh was again arguing along these lines, but with greater urgency. The progress of the Siberian railway seemed to promise a great strengthening of the Russian position in North China, and before this could come about it was essential to be prepared. In Kashgaria, also, danger threatened, and—

"before that province is absorbed by Russia, we should endeavour to secure a frontier which will keep her as far away as possible, lest, when the time for actual demarcation arrives, we may find the Russians as inconveniently near us on the Taghdumbash and Karakorum as they now are on the north of Chitral.

The same reasoning applies to Tibet as a buffer region. Unless we secure the reversion of Lhasa, we may find the Russians there before us."¹²

Ardagh, of course, did not envisage that the Russians were going to give serious consideration to the possibility of using Tibet as a vantage point whence to launch an invasion of India. His remarks, just quoted, were made in a letter to the Foreign Office in which he enclosed another report by Bower, now a Major, containing some shrewd observations on the nature of Russian interest in Tibet. Bower wrote that—

"At some future date the Russians may desire to possess themselves of Lhasa. As the Mecca of the Buddhist world its possession would give them great prestige in the eyes of the Mongol world and their presence there even in very small numbers would cause uneasiness in Calcutta and Bengal. From a purely military view their position would be faulty. A large force would starve and a small one could easily be driven out or crushed by a superior force from India. But 200 men and a couple of mountain guns could take Lhasa and that number of Russians there would be sufficient to cause restlessness among the natives in Calcutta.

The Chang or high tableland north of Lhasa with enormous stretches of desert forms incomparably the strongest frontier in the world and it would be well to keep it between us and Russia."¹³

Bower, of course, did not think that the Russians would get Chinese Turkestan for yet a while, and the question of Russia in Tibet was "remote, but not one entirely to be lost sight of."¹⁴ By December 1900, however, one observer of affairs in Chinese Turkestan at least was beginning to be more concerned at the advance of Russian influence in Kashgaria. This was George Macartney, whose long residence in Kashgar had probably made him the most experienced British observer of politics in this region. Macartney was inclined to suggest that Britain should

cease her hopeless struggle to compete with Russian commerce in Chinese Turkestan and to declare that Kashgaria was "outside the sphere of our political interest." He added that

"this need not necessarily imply any direct encouragement to Russia to occupy this province, which is already within her grasp, nor does this preclude us from taking action elsewhere—in Tibet for instance—to readjust the balance of power likely to be disturbed by the occupation."¹⁵

The conclusion, in short, was that Chinese Turkestan was the buffer between Tibet and Russia and that Tibet was the buffer between Chinese Turkestan and Northern and North-Eastern India. The extension of Russian influence over Chinese Turkestan, which seemed to many observers a most probable eventuality, could only lead to an intensification of British political interest in Tibet. A good case could be made, moreover, that Russia would find Tibet of sufficient value to her in her plans in Mongolia and Manchuria so as to make it reasonably certain that a Russian advance into Chinese Turkestan would give rise to Russian intrigue in Tibet. This, in any case, would seem to follow from the endless nature of Russian advance in Central Asia, to which Prince Gortchakov had given a theoretical description in the 1860s. Curzon, for one, had no doubts concerning the pattern of Russian expansion. With characteristic vigour he wrote in 1901 that :

"As a student of Russian aspirations and methods for fifteen years, I assert with confidence—what I do not think any of her own statesmen would deny—that her ultimate ambition is the dominion of Asia. She conceives herself to be fitted for it by temperament, by history, and by tradition. It is a proud and not ignoble aim, and it is well worthy of the supreme moral and material efforts of a vigorous nation. But it is not to be satisfied by piecemeal concessions, neither is it capable of being gratified save at our expense. Acquiescence in the aims of Russia at Teheran or Meshed will not save Seistan. Acquiescence in Seistan will not turn her eyes from the Gulf. Acquiescence in the Gulf will not prevent intrigue and trouble in Baluchistan. Acquiescence in Herat and in Afghan Turkestan will not secure Kabul. Acquiescence in the Pamirs will not save Kashgar. Acquiescence at Kashgar will not divert Russian eyes from Tibet. Each morsel but whets her appetite for more, and inflames the passion for a pan-Asiatic dominion. If Russia is entitled to these ambitions, still more is Britain entitled, nay compelled, to defend that which she won, and to resist the minor encroachments which are only a part of the larger plan."¹⁶

IV

The theoretical reasons why the British should do something about Tibet should the Russians establish themselves in Chinese Turkestan were clear enough. Had the Younghusband Mission taken place with such an event as its background it would have almost certainly aroused far less

controversy at home. But the Mission took place when Tibet was still divided from the nearest Russian territory by a large tract of the Chinese Empire. The extent of Russian influence in Tibet in 1904, if there was any influence at all, could hardly be said to have involved more than the establishment in Lhasa of a few Russian agents, and the signing of a treaty, or treaties, of extremely doubtful political and military value. It was hard to argue that these, alone, constituted a serious threat to the security of India's Northern Frontier. Yet there were many British observers who looked on the establishment at Lhasa of a Russian agent enjoying the confidence of the Dalai Lama as a most untoward event.

At the time when the Sikkim-Tibet Convention of 1894 was being negotiated the British had been determined, for reasons of prestige, to prevent the Chinese from establishing even a shadow of a claim to sovereignty over British protected territory. As Sir Mortimer Durand then wrote :

“ If we give way in respect to Sikkim, we must be prepared to do so, at some future time, not only with regard to Bhutan and Nepal, but with regard to Kashmir and her feudatories, such as Hunza and Nagar, and with regard to any of the smaller Himalayan States which may have committed themselves. We might even have China claiming suzerain rights over Darjeeling and the Bhutan Dooars, which we acquired from her so-called feudatories.”¹⁷

The Himalayan States, of course, had even closer political ties to Tibet than they ever had to China. A revival of Tibetan claims in this area, with Russian backing, could prove highly embarrassing to British prestige even if it did not give rise to annoying border disturbances.

Nepal was a particularly fruitful field for such activity. It was highly jealous of its independence and, if placed in a delicate position between Britain and Russia, it could possibly become less co-operative in the matter of supplying those highly valued Gurkha soldiers who held such an important place in the structure of the Indian Army. As early as 1887 Ney Elias had remarked that; “ Tibet may have attractions for the Russians affording a road for their intrigues to the back door of Nepal, and they perhaps dream of the day when they may be able to send a Vitkevitch or a Stolietoff to Katmandu.” But in 1887 it was still possible to add that; “ as long as Lhasa remains closed to us, it will also remain closed to Russia, and her only lines of access to Nepal lie through Lhasa territory.”¹⁸

Following the reports, from October 1900 onwards, of the activities of Dorjjeff in Lhasa and in Russia, the War Office gave some thought to what effect Russian intrigues with the Dalai Lama might have on Nepal. The conclusion, which Lord Roberts endorsed, was that there was little danger of the Russians at that time, or in the foreseeable future, using Tibet as a base for military operations against India; but that there was a real danger that the Russians could “ acquire at least a nominal protectorate over Tibet,” and that this would be enough to raise political complications in Nepal. Perhaps the Russians might start recruiting Gurkha forces; and anything which would hinder the flow of Gurkha

recruits into the British service would, so Lord Roberts said, "be a real misfortune."¹⁹

Curzon certainly thought along these lines. As he wrote privately to Hamilton on 11 June, 1901 :

"If we do nothing in Tibet we shall have Russia trying to establish a protectorate in less than ten years. This might not constitute a military danger, at any rate for some time, but would be a political danger. The effect on Nepal, Sikkim, and Bhutan would constitute a positive danger. We cannot prevent Russia from taking Mongolia and Chinese Turkestan, though we may delay the latter a little. But I think we can, and ought, to stop a Russian protectorate over Tibet, by being in advance ourselves. . . . Unless we know what is going on in Lhasa, we may have a Russian protectorate at no distant date, without having had the slightest inkling of what has been going on. If Russia reaches the Nepal boundary we shall have the latter country transformed into a second Afghanistan. Tibet, not Nepal, must be the buffer between ourselves and Russia."²⁰

These remarks, which, it is interesting to note, were made after Dorjjeff's visit to Russia in October 1900, had been widely reported, provide a fruitful basis for an interpretation of Curzon's policy at this time. Russian influence on the Nepalese border was most undesirable, and should be avoided. The establishment of that influence did not seem to be an event of the immediate future, but its very possibility demanded that British intelligence in Tibet should be of the highest quality. Should the time come, it is clearly implied, when a Russian protectorate was imminent, and, at that same time, the British were still unable to extend their intelligence and their political influence into the councils of Lhasa, then the need for a strong British policy to the north of the Himalayas could no longer be ignored. As it is hoped the following pages will show, Curzon's assessment both of the likelihood of a Russian protectorate over Tibet and of the effectiveness of British intelligence and British secret diplomacy in Lhasa was changed during the years 1901 and 1902 under the pressure of steadily accumulating evidence.

V

It was easy enough to argue from first principles—as Curzon had from at least 1889²¹—that the Russians would like to establish close relations with the Government of the Dalai Lama: it was far more difficult to produce any concrete evidence that they were, in fact, achieving any success in this direction. It has been suggested that the Russians were implementing a Tibetan policy since at least 1893.²² If so, very little indication of this came to the notice of the Indian Government in the last decade of the Nineteenth Century. In 1894 the Russian press reported the recent visit to Lhasa of two Russian travellers, presumably Asians, named Menkujinov and Ulanov.²³ In 1895 O'Connor, Minister in Peking, sent a report to the Viceroy which, being fairly typical of the information on Tibetan affairs, which the Peking Legation saw fit to provide

from time to time, deserves quotation at length. O'Connor wrote that :

“ A medical gentleman who is on intimate terms with several Chinese officials told me this afternoon that he had lately seen the Assistant to the Chinese Amban in Tibet, Kuei Ta-Jen, who had returned to Peking and from whom he had heard the following story.

Some time ago some Russian officers had been in communication with the Tibetan authorities—my informant was unable to state even approximately the date—and impressed upon them the importance of maintaining friendly relations with the Russians who alone were able to protect them against the ambitious designs of the English who evidently coveted possession of Tibet. If difficulties arose between England and Tibet the Russians would come to the assistance of the Tibetans and they handed them two letters, the first to be sent to the nearest Russian official in case of any disagreement and the second in case the British menaced their independence in any way. Upon receipt of the second letter the Tibetans could count upon Russian assistance.

These letters were given to the Dalai Lama from whose hands they passed into the hands of the Chinese Amban.

My informant was so vague as to the time when this occurred that I almost hesitate to report it, but in case it should coincide with other information in Your Lordship's possession, I mention it for what it may be worth.”²⁴

It was not until late 1898 and early 1899 that more substantial details of Russian activity in Tibet began to come to light. In December 1898 J. C. White, Political Officer for Sikkim, who had since 1894 been in charge of dealings with the Tibetans along the Sikkim-Tibet frontier, stated that : “ I believe the time has come now to take up a strong position such as would lead to Great Britain becoming paramount in Lhasa.” Amongst other reasons for such a step he argued that : “ the Russians are making progress in the north, and have already, I am informed, tried to make their influence felt in Tibet. We should certainly be there before them, and not allow the Tibetan markets to be closed to English goods.”²⁵ In April 1899 Le Mesurier, Officiating Political Officer for Sikkim, talked with the Chinese Resident in Tibet who had come down to Yatung on the Sikkim border. The Resident then remarked that if the Indian Government was too harsh in its terms to the Tibetans, the latter “ would fall back on the support of Russia who had already offered them assistance.”²⁶ The somewhat cryptic observations of White and Le Mesurier received a certain degree of amplification in the early summer of 1898 when an article in the *Simla News* by one Paul Möwis, Darjeeling resident and self-styled Tibetan expert, to the effect that in the winter of 1898-1899 Lhasa had been visited by a party of Russians under the leadership of an officer named Baranoff. In May Möwis told the Indian Foreign Office that reports of this visit were circulating in the Darjeeling bazaars. A Lhasa friend of his, moreover, had told him that these Russians did not speak English and their leader, in Tibetan spelling, was called *Sbaranuff*,

whom Möwis identified with a certain Baranoff whom he said had once been secretary to the great Russian explorer Prjevalski.²⁷

None of this could be called intelligence of the first order; yet it undoubtedly made a profound impression on the newly arrived Viceroy, Lord Curzon. On May 24, 1899, the day after Möwis made his report, Curzon wrote privately to Lord George Hamilton, Secretary of State for India, as follows:

“The Lamas there (Tibet) have found out the weakness of China. At the same time they are being approached by Russia. There seems little doubt that Russian agents, and possibly even someone of Russian origin, have been at Lhasa, and I believe that the Tibetan Government is coming to the conclusion that it will have to make friends with one or other of the two great Powers. That our case should not be stated in these circumstances, and that judgement should go against us by default, would be a great pity. Inasmuch as we have no hostile designs against Tibet; as we are in a position to give them something on the frontier to which they attach great importance and we none; and as the relations that we desire to establish with them are almost exclusively those of trade, I do not think it ought to be impossible, if I could get into communication with the Tibetan Government, to come to terms.”²⁸

There can be no doubt that these somewhat nebulous reports of Russian activity did stimulate greatly the policy of opening direct communication with the Dalai Lama which Curzon tried to carry out right up to the end of 1901.

In late 1900 Curzon still had sufficient faith in the happy outcome of this policy to take lightly the first reports of Dorjjeff's visit to Russia in October of that year. As he wrote to Hamilton in November, 1900:

“We are inclined here to think that the Tibetan Mission to the Czar is a fraud, and does not come from Lhasa at all. That the Russians have for a long time been trying to penetrate that place is quite certain; that a Russian Tibetan, or Mongolian Envoy may conceivably have been there and may have opened negotiations is also possible; but that the Tibetan Lamas have so far overcome their incurable suspicion of all things European as to send an open Mission to Europe seems to me most unlikely. Tibet is, I think, much more likely in reality to look to us for protection than to look to Russia, and I cherish a secret hope that the communication which I am trying to open with the Dalai Lama may inaugurate some sort of relation between us. Anyhow, I am not much disturbed by these rumours, of which I expect you will be able, before long, to get to the bottom.”²⁹

VI

Curzon was to be disappointed in his “secret hope.” All attempts to establish communications with the Government of the Dalai Lama failed dismally. The fault lay not with the want of trying on the part of the

British, but in the extreme difficulty in finding suitable messengers to carry letters between India and Lhasa. Such messengers had to combine in their persons the ability to get into touch with the highest circles in Lhasa with the power to cross freely the Tibetan border. They had to be trustworthy, from a British point of view, and discreet, while at the same time they had to be above suspicion in Tibet of being British spies. There were very few people at the disposal of the British with all these qualities. The average "pundit" of the survey of India could not hope to meet high Tibetan officers; the European stood little chance, even in disguise, of penetrating to Lhasa; the most sophisticated native agent then available, Sarat Chandra Das, had been well known in Tibet as a British agent since the early 1880s. These hard facts became apparent to Curzon as he tried to find means of getting his messages into the hands of the Dalai Lama. By 1900 a number of potential agents had been considered. Taw Sein Ko, Adviser on Chinese Affairs to the Government of Burma, looked promising; but he was ruled out, mainly because "he is very fat, and would probably be unequal to the hardships in a journey to, and residence in, Lhasa."³⁰ There was a possibility of employing Chirang Palgez, a leading Ladaki from Leh who had headed the traditional Lapchak Mission from Leh to Lhasa on several occasions; but Chirang Palgez had lately taken to "chang" beyond moderation, and could no longer be relied upon.³¹ By 1900 the Indian Government had concluded that there were but two methods of any promise whereby a letter from them might find its way to Lhasa. A British official might make his way to Gartok, and there hand over a letter either to the two Governors, or Garpons, of that Western Tibetan market town, or to the leader of the official Tibetan trading missions which passed through that town from time to time.³² A letter might reach Lhasa in the hands of Ugyen Kazi, the Bhutanese representative in Darjeeling, whom the Bengal Government had been using as an intermediary with the Tibetans since at least 1898.³³

Neither method proved successful. The Gartok route was tried by Captain Kennion in September, 1900. A letter was placed in the hands of the Garpons, addressed to the Dalai Lama, but was returned with conflicting excuses in the following spring.³⁴ Ugyen Kazi, who had reported much to indicate that he would soon woo the Dalai Lama, likewise failed to bring home any reply to the Viceroy's letter. He said, on his return from Lhasa in October 1901, that the Dalai Lama had told him that he was bound by tradition not to accept communications from people like the British.³⁵

By October 1901, therefore, it had become clear to Curzon that he had failed to discover an effective method of getting into touch with the Dalai Lama. In the months that followed, moreover, it came to seem highly probable that Ugyen Kazi's failure was due as much to that Bhutanese official's treachery as to any other factor. Evidence came to light that not only had Ugyen Kazi lied when he said he had delivered the Viceroy's letter into the hands of the Dalai Lama, but also that he had betrayed the trust placed in him by the British by revealing all he knew about these negotiations to the chief Tibetan ministers—(Shapes or Khalons)—

one of whom, at least, was known to be actively hostile to British policy.³⁶

Curzon was somewhat disturbed by this turn of events. As he wrote privately to Hamilton on November 5, 1901 :

“ You will remember my telling you, some time ago, when we were discussing what should be done after getting into communication with the Dalai Lama, that the opening of communications at all, not their prosecution or their sequel, was the crux. This has been borne out by the experience of the Bhutanese Envoy, Ugyen Kazi, whom we sent up, or rather entrusted with that last letter from me. He alleges that he handed it to the Dalai Lama himself, and that the latter refused to take it. Accordingly, he brought it back with the seal intact. I do not believe this story. I do not believe that the man ever saw the Dalai Lama or handed the letter to him. On the contrary, I believe him to be a liar, and, in all probability, a paid Tibetan spy.”³⁷

- Whether Ugyen Kazi was, in fact, a “ paid Tibetan spy,” or not, is a question which we cannot answer here. The important point is that by the autumn of 1901 Curzon had discovered that there existed no method whereby he could send his letters to the Dalai Lama, let alone open diplomatic conversations with him. This discovery, moreover, was made at a time when Dorjjeff had made his second much-publicized journey to Russia.

VII

In 1900, when the first reports of Dorjjeff's activities emerged, Curzon, we have seen, was inclined to dismiss the affair as “ a fraud.” The second Dorjjeff mission of the summer of 1901 was not dismissed so lightly. As Curzon wrote privately to Hamilton on September 11, 1901 :

“ I am afraid it cannot be said that the Tibetan Mission to Russia only represents Monasteries in the North of Tibet. On the contrary, the head of the Mission though originally a Russian Mongolian subject has been resident in Lhasa for many years, and is no doubt familiar with the priestly Junta who rule in that place. I do not myself believe that he is upon a mission, or that he conveys a formal message from the Dalai Lama to the Tsar, but that he will go back with such a mission and such a message, I have not the slightest doubt whatever, nor that, whether the traditional attitude of the Tibetan Government is thereby affected or not, the result must in any case be unfavourable to ourselves.”³⁸

This change of attitude was largely based on disquieting reports on the movements of Dorjjeff and his followers which did not reflect much credit on the efficiency of British intelligence in Tibet. When the stories of Dorjjeff's visit to Russia in October 1900 first emerged, Curzon naturally sought further information from Darjeeling, the centre for the conduct of Anglo-Tibetan relations, and the home of S. C. Das, the leading expert in India on Tibetan politics at that time. The reply, telegraphic, to this query, dated November 14, 1900, was as follows :

"Sarat Candra (Das) has no knowledge of Dorjien (Dorjjeff). He feels sure that, if any mission had been sent from Lhasa, he would have heard regarding it, and thinks it probable mission went from Urga in Mongolia."³⁹

This opinion, Curzon was to discover a few months later, was a false one, and probably deliberately so. Dorjjeff, on his way to Russia in 1900, passed through Darjeeling and British India, leaving by sea from a British port. While in Darjeeling he stayed at a Buddhist monastery whose Abbott was subsidized by the Bengal Government in return for information on transients from Tibet: and there Dorjjeff was met by S. C. Das. This was in May or June 1900, but no word of it reached Curzon until January 1901.⁴⁰

In April 1901 Dorjjeff and three companions once more passed through British India from Tibet via Nepal, and embarked at Bombay on a ship bound for Singapore, whence Dorjjeff made his way to Odessa by way of Peking, Chita, the Trans-Siberian and the Trans-Caspian. While in Peking Dorjjeff stayed with the Russian postmaster, another Buriat named Gomboieff. No news of all these proceedings reached Simla until after the world had learnt through the Russian press that Dorjjeff had arrived in Russia on another mission from the Dalai Lama to the Tsar.⁴¹

The fact that Dorjjeff had twice travelled in secret through British India—and the shifty behaviour of some of his associates, one of whom, in March to August, 1900, travelled from Calcutta to Darjeeling under a variety of aliases and told a number of conflicting stories about himself⁴²—did not prove that Dorjjeff was actually negotiating between the Tsar and the Dalai Lama. It did prove, however, that British intelligence on what was going on in Tibet was quite inadequate for that period when Anglo-Russian competition had reached a new intensity within the borders of the Chinese Empire following the Boxer troubles.

One consequence of these developments was that Curzon resolved to take the conduct of Anglo-Tibetan relations under his direct control, an event which could only intensify British pressure on the Sikkim-Tibet frontier.⁴³ Another consequence was that Curzon, now that he had discovered that he could neither get into touch with the Dalai Lama himself, nor keep a close watch on what the other side was doing in the Tibetan capital—it no longer seemed that if the British could not make friends with the Dalai Lama, then nor could the Russians—began to give serious thoughts to solutions of the Tibetan problem by means other than diplomatic. His letter to Hamilton of July 10, 1901, after his discovery of the second journey of Dorjjeff through British India, would lead to this conclusion. He then wrote that:

"I am very much exercised over the question of Tibet. An incidental consequence of the policy of leaving political relations with smaller States in the hands of Local Governments, which I did not mention to you last year because I was unaware of its existence, has recently come to light in connection with the Tibetan frontier. Bengal has charge of Sikkim, and, as a consequence, of the political

relations with Tibet and the whole Tibetan frontier. So utterly have they failed in the discharge of this particular duty, that we now learn that two Tibetan Missions that visited the Tsar at Livadia last year, and again in this, left Lhasa, crossed the British border, passed in one case through Darjeeling, and in the other through Segowlie, traversed India by rail, and took ship from Indian ports, without the slightest inkling on the part of the Bengal Government or its agents that any such persons had been in their midst. Who would have believed it possible that negotiations could have passed between Lhasa and St. Petersburg, not through Siberia, or Mongolia, or China, but through British India itself? I spoke to Woodburn about this matter before I left Calcutta, and he admitted that the conduct of this sort of political business by his officers was so inadequate that he should not feel at all hurt if I would take over the political control of Sikkim and that frontier myself. I am not certain that a little later on, when the Dalai Lama rejects or returns my last letter, as he probably will, and assumes a position of confirmed hostility (probably under the influence of Russia), I shall not require to adopt some such policy towards Tibet as Tibet adopts towards ourselves; in other words, we might have to prevent any Tibetan subject or caravan from crossing our frontier. We could do this, I think, without much difficulty. It would be giving the Tibetans tit for their tat, and it would, I expect, bring them more promptly to their knees than any other proposal. I do not know, and I have never really discussed it with you, what attitude His Majesty's Government is likely to assume about a Russian protectorate over Tibet. It seems to me that we should have just as much reason to protest against any such consummation as Russia would have to object to a British protectorate over Manchuria. Tibet is not necessary to Russia; it has no relations, commercial or otherwise, with Russia; its independent existence implies no menace to Russia. On the other hand, a Russian protectorate there would be a distinct menace and a positive source of danger to ourselves. I hope that no Government at home would acquiesce in such a surrender."⁴⁴

At about this time Curzon was also beginning to think about some sort of mission to Lhasa, but only in very general and hypothetical terms, as he hastened to assure Hamilton in July 1901. These were "ideas which have hardly yet taken shape in my mind, and which are certainly by many stages removed from action."⁴⁵

VIII

By the end of 1902 the idea of a mission to Lhasa had become to Curzon a matter of more than theoretical interest. He had become convinced that it was the only solution to the Tibetan problem and he was urging its adoption with all the eloquence at his disposal. The reasons behind this lay not so much in events in Tibet as in events in China. By the end of 1902 there had emerged a considerable body of evidence,

very little of which has been published in the Blue Books, that the Chinese had given to Russia by secret treaty some sort of protectorate over Tibet.

Hints and rumours that Russia and China might be acting jointly in respect to Tibet seem to have first emerged from Nepal in January and February 1902.⁴⁶ In May, 1902 the Chinese reformer Kang Yu-wei, then living in Darjeeling, told the Bengal Government that the Chinese—by which he meant Jung Lu—had just signed a treaty with Russia which gave that Power a protectorate over Tibet.⁴⁷ By August Sir Ernest Satow in Peking was telling of similar rumours, which he said had been reported in the Chinese press. He gave details of the alleged treaty, of 12 articles; and a version of the same treaty was reported on the Sikkim-Tibet frontier.⁴⁸ Satow did not have any reason to believe that such a treaty had been signed, but he did think that—

“it is reasonable to suppose that some sort of *pourparlers* of an unofficial kind have taken place between the Russian Legation and a member of the Grand Council on the international position of Tibet.”⁴⁹

By October 1902 these rumours had been reinforced by much information, perhaps of a doubtful nature, but impressive in its quantity and its detail. Satow, for instance, was told of a draft of a treaty between Jung Lu and the Russians, complete with Jung Lu's seal, in which the Russians guaranteed Jung Lu's immunity from any punishment by the Powers for his somewhat ambiguous rôle during the Boxer rising in return for the granting to Russia of a special status in China, Tibet, Mongolia and Chinese Turkestan.⁵⁰

The Dalai Lama, so the rumours had it, was aware of these agreements, which, presumably, met with his approval. Hardinge, for instance, reported from St. Petersburg that an anonymous, but usually reliable, informant had told him of a treaty with the Dalai Lama which gave Russia the right to station an agent in Lhasa.⁵¹ In the same month Satow, in Peking, was shown an intercepted telegram from the Chinese Resident in Lhasa to Jung Lu announcing that, with the approval of the Dalai Lama a Russian officer accompanied by a mining engineer and an escort was on his way to Tibet.⁵² The reference to mining—and the treaty which Satow and others reported in August also contained references to Russian interest in Tibetan minerals—must have lent an air of truth to these rumours. In 1899 the India Office was convinced that the Russians had plans to exploit Tibet's alleged wealth in gold, a wealth which, it seemed, had also aroused the interest of the Rothschilds.⁵³

Curzon seems to have had little doubt, by the end of 1902, that the Sino-Russian agreement concerning Tibet was real enough. He can hardly be blamed for this attitude when a cautious diplomat like Satow was describing the rumours concerning this agreement as representing “the current belief among the Chinese as to the secret engagements of Russia with the Manchu party”,⁵⁴ and when Lord Lansdowne was able to minute in October 1902 that “the story of the Russo-Chinese agreement as to Tibet is supported by a good deal of evidence.”⁵⁵ Telegrams,

such as the following to Hamilton of November 9, 1902, showed this conviction :

“News has been received from Yatung by Political Officer in Sikkim . . . that the Junklo (sic) Chinese Grand Secretary has sent information by despatch to Amban that he should at all costs prevent negotiations between Tibet and India till the spring of 1903, when an expedition, for which preparations are secretly and rapidly progressing, will have enabled Manchurian-Russian troops to occupy Lhasa.”⁵⁶

And a few days later, on November 14, 1902 :

“Captain Parr (Chinese Customs Officer at Yatung) has no doubt that Russian treaty relating Tibet is an accomplished fact. He derives this information from several quarters, but chiefly from Kang Yu-wei, whose informant in China is stated to be the present Viceroy of Chili, Yuan Shih-kai.”⁵⁷

On November 13, 1902, Curzon wrote privately to Hamilton about these rumours and his reactions to them. He said that :

“I am myself a firm believer in the existence of a secret understanding, if not a secret treaty, between Russia and China about Tibet: and as I have before said, I regard it as a duty to frustrate this little game while there is yet time. Our recent action on the Sikkim border greatly flustered the authorities both at Lhasa and Peking, and for a time there was great talks of envoys and negotiations. Suddenly, under orders from Peking, all this was suspended, and for weeks we have heard nothing. My impression is that the Russians have told the Chinese on no account to negotiate with us, or to allow us to come to close quarters with the Tibetans, for the result of such proceedings must be greater intercourse between India and Tibet, if not an improved treaty. My idea, therefore, is that we should let the Chinese and Tibetans play the game of procrastination for some little time longer, and should then say—as it is clear that they do not mean business—that we propose to send a Mission up to Lhasa to negotiate a new treaty in the spring. . . . I would inform China and Tibet that it was going, and go it should. It would be a pacific mission intended to conclude a treaty of friendship and trade with the Tibetan Government. But it would be accompanied by a sufficient force to ensure its safety. We might even get the Nepalese to join by providing the escort. They would be delighted, for they are itching to have a go at Tibet themselves. These ideas are only thrown out in the rough. I will mature them as time proceeds.”⁵⁸

The idea of the “pacific mission” to Lhasa, as is well known, did not meet with the approval of many members of the Home Government. The Tibet Blue Books labour this point. But few who then thought about the Tibetan problem would have denied that something had to be done. Lansdowne advocated diplomatic notes to China and Russia,

which, of course, met with emphatic denials that anything was afoot in Tibet. The India Office was inclined to set the Nepalese on to the Tibetans, with covert British support. "Might not Nipal," Sir. W. Lee-Warner wrote in September 1902, "be urged to send a force to Lhasa and demand from Tibet an assurance that it would permit no Russian troops to enter its country?"⁵⁹ The India Office welcomed a scheme of this sort,⁶⁰ and even Lansdowne was impressed by Lee-Warner's suggestion. As he commented on Lee-Warner's "Note on Tibet" in which this scheme was outlined: "I think he is right. It is impossible to depend on the Chinese in cases of this kind. The Nipalese are friendly and would fight."⁶¹

Curzon was convinced that a mission to Lhasa was the only possible solution, and he argued this so convincingly in his great despatch of January 1903 that the India Office could but agree with him in principle.⁶² The problem, so Hamilton put it, was to find a good international case to justify such a mission. As he wrote to Curzon on January 28, 1903:

"Your Tibetan despatch requires considerable examination before we can definitely give you an answer to the propositions you advance. But there are certain points which are self evident. We cannot ignore the cumulative evidence that there is a secret treaty or understanding between Russia and the authorities at Lhasa. If we sit still and do nothing, and the rumours of such a treaty be confirmed by its publicity, then we shall in any movement we may make against Tibet, have Russia behind them. If we assume that these two propositions are unanswerable, then arises the further question: Can we establish a good international case for the course of action you suggest? I do not think it likely that a Mission formed on the lines you suggest would arrive at Lhasa without fighting and I assume that you would be compelled to send an escort of very considerable dimensions, as its communications must to some extent be guarded. As far as I can judge from looking at the map, there is such a vast distance, such impossible country, between . . . the Russian frontier . . . and Lhasa . . . that no material interference on the part of the Tibetans is for the time being possible by Russia. These considerations commend your proposals to me, but I have been unable to discuss it with Lansdowne, who has not, as you know, been well, and whose time has been greatly taken up recently with the Venezuelan negotiations."⁶³

On February 13, 1903, Hamilton again wrote on Tibet that—

"if we are not prepared to take action now with these elements in our favour, it seems to me perfectly hopeless for Great Britain to attempt to arrest Russia's progress in any part of Asia. But there are obvious difficulties which will have to be faced, if a mission you suggest is to force its way into Lhasa; and unless some satisfactory explanation can be given on these points, the Cabinet will probably hesitate and delay until it may be too late to send an expedition this year."⁶⁴

How a "good international case" for a mission to Lhasa was established must lie beyond our present scope. That much of the British diplomacy on the Tibetan frontier throughout 1903 was designed to bring this about can hardly be doubted by any who have read the Curzon-Hamilton correspondence. Curzon argued throughout 1903 that the only solution to the Tibetan problem lay in a mission to Lhasa. He refused to believe Russian denials that they had any ambitions in Tibet.⁶⁵ He refused to agree that it would be better to wait until the Russians had further shown their hand. Preventative action was called for. As he said to Hamilton on March 12, 1902:

"If we are not to defend our frontiers, to ward off gratuitous menace, to maintain our influence in regions where no hostile influence has ever yet appeared, until the national honour has been grossly affronted, the practical result will be that you will not be able to keep a step upon your frontiers until they have actually been crossed by the forces of the enemy."⁶⁶

This is about what Sir John Ardagh had been suggesting in 1896 and 1898. Tibetan policy, as Curzon saw it, was but one manifestation of the forward policy which advocated vigilance on the frontiers. It was inspired, as had been British policy towards Tibet since 1888, by much the same considerations. Present policy, in the language of games, was to play one's own correct move now so as to make it impossible for the enemy, whoever he might be, Chinese or Russian, to play his correct move at some later date.

IX

Tibetan policy, in these notes, has been considered solely as an aspect of the "Great Game." This is not to deny that there did exist arguments between the British and the Tibetans about trade, the frontier, and the observance of treaties. But Curzon's outline of his views on Tibet, as he made it privately to Hamilton, shows how small a part these matters played in his thinking. Where these other matters did prove of importance was in the making of "a good international case" for the Younghusband Mission, and for this reason they figure very largely in the Blue Books.

Democracies, perhaps fortunately, do not often embark upon preventative wars; and when they do so embark, only do so in the face of considerable popular protest at home. Such was the nature of the Younghusband Mission, which bears many striking similarities to recent events in the Middle East. Such preventative actions are extremely hard to justify in public, especially when they are designed to forestall the policy of a great power, a policy which has not yet reached maturity and which the power in question claims does not exist. Their success is even harder to assess: it is all too easy to say that if the danger which the preventative action was designed to obviate never materialises, then that danger has never existed.

The dangers which Curzon tried to prevent in Tibet must be viewed, if any assessment of his policy is to be arrived at, in the light of the

political climate of, say, 1902 or 1903. At this time Curzon thought that Russian intrigue in and over Tibet might be dangerous to British interests. He had at his disposal much evidence to suggest that this intrigue was, indeed, afoot. Could he afford to ignore that evidence? Curzon thought not. In that period following the Boxer rising when the Russians were busy establishing themselves in Korea, Manchuria and Mongolia, it would be hard to say that Curzon did not have much reason on his side. The mission to Tibet was the British counter to the reported Sino-Russian treaty over Tibet of 1902, and its outlines were laid down in that year. It was certainly not, as has sometimes been argued, a device to take advantage of Russia when she was involved in a war with Japan.

Was it successful? From the point of view of Curzon's own career and reputation the Younghusband Mission was unfortunate. But it was not followed by a strengthening of the Russian position in Tibet. The Chinese gained from it for a while, it is true, but then China was a preferable neighbour to Russia. And in the long run it cannot be denied that the British Mission to Lhasa of 1904 did pave the way for the emergence of an independent Tibet under the rule of the 13th Dalai Lama, to the great benefit of the peace of the northern frontiers of India during the closing decades of British rule in the Indian subcontinent.

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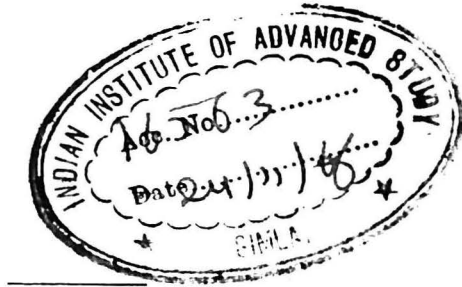
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