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THE GREAT KAZAK EPIC

By M. PHILIPS PRICE, M.P.

ONE of the most heroic stories in the history of Central Asia can now be told of the fate of a small but widely spread nomad population known as the Kazaks. People who try to live these days a purely pastoral and wandering life, moving with the seasons from plain to mountain and back in search of grazing, are more and more subject to the pressure of modern society to change their habits. Up-to-date methods of ranching as in Australia or on the American continent can be more productive if less picturesque, and government administrations of today are intolerant of people whom they can only with difficulty control and tax. Yet the population of Central Asia contains people who have since the dawn of history lived only this way. Many of them have succumbed to the struggle and have settled down as cultivators of the soil or have gone to work in the bazaars of market towns as carriers. Some live a half-nomad, half-settled existence. In recent years the pressure has become even more serious because the nomads are up against Communism, which has advanced since the change in China till it now dominates the heart of the continent. Non-Communist governments were more tolerant of the nomads. An exception to this was of course the first Pahlevi Shah of Persia in his dealings with the Lurs, Bakhtiariis and Kashgais in South and West Persia. But even if there was not persecution there were always disabilities placed on the nomads. Thus for years under the rule of the Tsars the Kazaks and Kirghiz of Russian Turkestan had much of their good lands taken away from them and made over to Russian settlers from Europe. Periodical revolts took place, the biggest being during the first World War, when the Tsar's Government tried to conscript the Kazaks for labour battalions behind the front. This armed revolt resulted in the massacre of several hundred thousand Kazaks. But now with the coming of Communism there is the additional ideological drive. Under the former régimes in Central Asia governments liked to control and tax, and settlers from Europe sought to acquire nomad lands. Now in addition comes the desire to indoctrinate people who as nomads would be hard to influence. Moreover a patriarchal form of society under which male heads of families (*aksakals* or grey-beards) had the main say, and sat in council to advise and even at times to elect tribal chiefs, was not to the liking of Communist commissars with ideological directives to follow laid down in Moscow and Peking. Modern society finds it hard to deal with nomads of the type which have evolved in Central Asia throughout the centuries. Other countries have had the same problems. The Turks have solved their Khurdish problem by wholesale deportations and resettlement in Central Anatolia. The British in India dealt with their North-west Frontier tribes

by subsidies and compromises. The Arabs have their problems with the Bedouins and the Khurds. Iraq has so far been the most successful Arab State in handling them. But in Central Asia there has been no compromise largely because of the coming of Communism. So a tragic, if heroic, fate has overtaken the Kazaks.

The Central Asian nomads are divided roughly into two kinds, the Kalmuks or Mongols who originally under Chinese influence became Buddhist many generations ago and speak Mongolian, and the Kazaks and Kirghiz who, though they come from the same racial stock as the Kalmuks, became Moslems under Arab influence and speak a dialect of Turkish. Most of the Kalmuks and Mongols live on the Chinese side of the great political frontier which runs north and south through Central Asia and divides the Russian from the Chinese political systems. On the other hand, the Kazaks and Kirghiz live mainly on the Russian side, but there is much overlapping. The Kirghiz are a branch of the Moslem nomad group and inhabit the Ala Tau mountains round Lake Issik Kul. The Kazaks live further north. Some two million of them live in the country between the Caspian Sea, Lake Balkash and the Chinese frontier. Some half a million live in what used to be called Chinese Turkestan and is now called Sinkiang, the country between the Altai mountains and the borders of North-west Tibet. They are divided into three tribes, the Kirei, the Naiman and the Uwak. The Naiman inhabit both the Chinese and Russian territories and the Kirei mostly the Chinese.

After the Russian Revolution little happened at first, but as the Bolsheviks got control of Russian Turkestan increasing interference with the Kazaks became the order of the day. The policy of collectivization began to be applied to their tribal flocks and herds. Many Kazaks refused to accept the new situation and migrated south. The movement started as far back as 1922, when the Bashmaks, anti-Red natives of the highlands of south Bokhara, led by the romantic Enver Pasha, held out against the Bolsheviks for a time but finally crossed the frontiers into Afghanistan and were disarmed. Some Kazaks joined this movement. Others, including Kirghiz from the Ala Tau and Kazaks from round Lake Balkash, in 1937 crossed over into China and then left via Khotan, reaching India via the Karakorams. At this time China was not Communist and Sinkiang was at times under the control of Chiang Kai Shek and at other times under native rulers. All through this time parties of Kazaks were leaving Russian Turkestan and filtering over into Afghanistan and India. So it is clear that this movement was going on for years. But it received a great impetus when the Communist revolution came in China by the victory of the Reds in the civil war in 1948. But it also made the situation of the Kazaks more serious because it enabled the new Communist powers in Sinkiang to close the passes over the Karakorams and the Pamirs into India and Afghanistan after 1951. This meant that the Kirei and part of the Naiman tribe of Kazaks who lived in the southern foothills of the Chinese Altai had no way of escape, should their lives be made intolerable, except across the frozen wastes of North-west Tibet.

Some time about 1950 the Chinese Communists began to make their life intolerable. Communist agents began to appear in the Kazaks camps

near Barkul, where their flocks were grazing in the foothills of the mountains. These agents said that the Kazaks had got to change their way of life. The Communist leaders in Urumtsi, the capital of the province, had decided that there were to be no more Hodjas or religious leaders. Tribal leaders like Janin Khan, Akli Bey, Attay Khan and Osman Bator must come to the capital as guarantee of good behaviour; all flocks and herds were now to be held in common by the tribe and a committee presided over by Communists from Urumtsi were to decide how the produce was to be divided. The Kazak children were to leave their homes and go to schools in the capital and so were to see their parents only once a year for a short time.

In this crisis in the history of their race the Kazaks decided to hold a council of *aksakals* or greybeards, the heads of families presided over by the Khan. After long deliberation they decided that they would not accept the Communist terms but would leave their ancestral homes and seek their fortunes in the free world outside the Iron Curtain. But the mountain passes to the south-west were now closed by Russian and Chinese Communists. The only way out lay south across the high plateau of North-west Tibet beyond which lay Kashmir and India. "Let us trek south towards the sun," said the wise men of the Kazaks, "and put our trust in Allah that he will save us." Thus began the last and most sensational of the Kazak treks from slavery to freedom.

So they left their pastures north of Barkul, and just as they were heading for the Tibetan frontier the Chinese Communists attacked them in force. They had rifles which they had originally got from the Chinese Nationalists and some ammunition. It was enough to enable them to fight a rearguard action with their backs to the mountains, hiding in the woods in the daytime and following *kachak yol* (hidden paths) at night. Ambushes on Communist forces enabled them to add to their stock of arms and ammunition. The magnificent marksmanship and horsemanship of the Kazaks stood them in good stead. They now split up. One lot, entering the Kansu province of China and passing to Machai Nor, a depression in the plateau with good grazing, found large encampments of Kalmuks or Buddhist Mongols. These received the Kazaks fairly well, because they disliked the Russians and associated them with Communists. They offered the Kazaks grazing ground for a time and then the latter moved on to Gazgöl, a large grazing area in the foothills of the Altyn Dag mountains. Here they met the other stream of Kazaks who had been less fortunate. They had crossed the terrible desert of Lop Nor where, in times past, the sands have advanced and engulfed ancient civilizations. The few water holes in this desert were occupied by Communist troops and most of the Kazaks had died of thirst and exhaustion. The remnants joined the other party at Gazgöl. Here the chiefs decided to rest for the winter and let their flocks recover on good pasture, while they prepared for the great trek across Tibet into India in the spring.

But they were to get no peace. In February 1951 the Communists attacked them at Gazgöl and their great military leader, Osman Bator, was killed. Collecting their flocks together hurriedly, they fought with their backs to the mountains, finally deciding to plunge into the unknown

country to the south and face the dangers of Nature rather than the danger of their human enemies. The country now that lay before them is unlike anything else in the world. It has a depth from north to south of 800 miles of high plateau at from 12,000 to 15,000 feet above sea level. No life exists here. Even the abominable snowman could not hold out. The plateau is studded with spurs of the Kuenlun range running east and west at from 16,000 to 25,000 feet. Most of the country has never even been visited by Europeans. A few British officers of the Indian Army Survey crossed parts of it at the end of last century when relations between empires were friendly. They did some rough mapping in places. Also two Russian explorers crossed another part. But most of it is marked in the map as "unexplored."

It was now February 1951, and the Kazaks had the terrible decision to make whether to surrender or face the journey in the dead of winter across this arctic wilderness. They decided on the latter, and, as they faced their terrible ordeal, they passed small parties of Tibetans, who had been grazing their yaks in some of the sheltered corries of this desolate region and were now hurrying north to winter pasture. The Kazaks asked them the way to India and they pointed south across the frozen wastes of snow, ice and rock beyond which lay the Himalayas and the valleys of Ladakh. Up to now the Kazaks had lived by killing big game—*maral* or wapiti, roe deer and ibex. But there were none of these now. They often went for days without food, but they managed to preserve in ice some haunches of venison that had been killed weeks before. They must have spent months in this way. All the children died and most of the women. The men fought on against the elements of this most inhospitable region of the world outside the Poles. Spring came at last and the summer of 1951 and this relieved their conditions somewhat. They struggled on to the south and in August of that year at last reached Leh, the chief town in the Kashmir province of Ladakh. There the Indian Government gave them shelter and food and there many of them still are, while others have passed on to Turkey, where they are among their own kith and kin. Of the 18,000 Kazaks who started out only 350 survived. These last and perhaps more are to be settled on the fertile wheat lands of Central Anatolia. Thus Turkey, true to her tradition, has once more provided a home for oppressed Moslems from Central Asia, fleeing from the Russians and now from Chinese Communists.

This is the story of the great Kazak trek, like the flight of the Kalmuks in the eighteenth century, as recorded in the famous book *The Revolt of the Tartars*. For centuries Central Asia has been the home of different peoples all equally picturesque but all equally free. The flight of the Kazaks shows what a change has been going on in recent years. The tyranny that has dominated Russia for many years and the new tyranny of China is now extending inwards to the heart of the continent. That same tyranny is seeking to cross the Himalayas and break up the ancient civilizations of Southern Asia. The flight of the Kazaks away from this tyranny is an epic which the free world in Europe and Asia ought to remember.



