MY VISIT TO CENTRAL ASIA, 1958

By SIR FITZROY MACLEAN, Bart., M.P.

Report of a lecture delivered to the Royal Central Asian Society on Wednesday, November 5, 1958, Sir Hugh Dow, G.C.I.E., K.C.S.I., in the chair.

The Chairman: It is my very pleasant task to introduce our speaker, Sir Fitzroy Maclean, M.P. I do not think I need say much about his career to date; it is familiar, no doubt, to all of you. After leaving Cambridge, he joined the Foreign Office and was well embarked on a career there when the war broke out after he had been at the Foreign Office for six years. He resigned, joined the Cameron Highlanders as a private, and in four years' time he was a brigadier in charge of the British Military Mission in Yugoslavia. For a long time he has been Member of Parliament for Lancaster division, and from 1954 to 1957 he was Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for War and Financial Secretary to the War Office.

Sir Fitzroy Maclean has made frequent journeys into Central Asia and also all round the Middle East. I am glad that he has agreed to speak to us today about Central Asia. We call ourselves "The Royal Central Asian Society," but we have extended our boundary a great deal and for a long time we have heard lectures about countries on the periphery. Now I ask Sir Fitzroy Maclean to give his lecture and tell us something about Central Asia itself.

I FIND myself in rather a dilemma. I have it in my favour, as your Chairman has just said, that this is the Central Asian Society and that my talk is about the very centre of Central Asia. But it is not too easy a subject to talk about, especially to an audience like this. I do not feel that I should be justified in giving you a travelogue, because the trip I have made this summer was nothing but a tourist expedition. I equally would not feel qualified to lecture to this audience on the subject of Central Asian history, art, architecture, literature, ethnology or anything of that kind.

Therefore, the best thing I can do is to make a few general observations and then ask the Chairman to throw the meeting open to questions and discussion; and if any of you want to ask me any questions, I will do my best to answer them. I also have some colour slides and a short movie film, which will probably be more interesting to me than to you because it is the first film I have ever taken and I have not yet seen it myself. It is of Bokhara, a place where I do not think many people have taken photographs or films.

The reason why these remarks are bound to be general is that Russian Central Asia—I am talking about what used to be called Russian Turkestan—like all the other non-Russian and, for that matter, Russian parts of the Soviet Union, has over the last 40 years become increasingly Sovietized. In this respect I noticed a big difference from my visit 20 years before, for Sovietization is progressing rapidly. Therefore, most of the remarks that I make today are equally applicable to the Soviet Union as a whole. It is becoming harder and harder to distinguish between one part of the Soviet Union and another.

I was lucky in having a standard of comparison. The Soviet Union,

particularly the remoter parts of it, is so completely different from the rest of the world, and especially from the Western democratic world in which we live, that unless one has some standard of comparison, one's first visit is apt to be bewildering. It is quite different from anything else. One tries to compare the place with what one is accustomed to at home, but that is not a proper comparison. It bears no relation to it. I was fortunate, because I had been there before. I could compare the Soviet Union of 1938 with the Soviet Union of 1958.

I had spent a couple of years in the Soviet Union at our Embassy in Moscow from 1937 to 1939, just 20 years ago, and during that time it was, naturally, my job to take an interest in the country and find out what I could about it, to speak the language, and so on. I was also very lucky in travelling about more, on the whole, than most people to places like Transcaucasia and particularly Siberia and Russian Central Asia, which at that time was normally closed to foreigners and to which I therefore had to go without the permission of the authorities.

At that time, the Soviet Union was at the height of what is now called Stalinism. Stalinism reached its peak, I should say, in about 1937 or 1938. With the exaggerated attention to detail of a homicidal maniac, Stalin was then wiping out not only anybody who had got in his way, but anybody who might conceivably get in his way in any respect at all. The atmosphere was one of terror. As far as day to day life was concerned, everything was sacrificed to the industrialization of what until then had been basically an agricultural community. Agriculture itself had been collectivized by the most brutal methods and the standard of living was just about as low as it could be. No interest was taken in the consumer. The consumer came last. Everything was put into building up heavy industry, the armament industry and the manufacture of machine tools.

Apart from that, apart from the terribly low standard of living and shops with practically nothing in them, there was the most appalling reign of terror. One felt this atmosphere of terror wherever one went, whether in Moscow or in the provinces, but perhaps worst of all in Moscow. Everybody was suspicious of everybody else. Everybody was afraid of being denounced by his nearest neighbour or by his children. One was always reading in the newspapers that little Ivan had been awarded a medal for denouncing his father as a saboteur or Japanese spy, or whatever it might be. That made for a very nasty atmosphere indeed.

The suspicion that Soviet citizens in general, whether Russians or non-Russians, felt for each other, was as nothing compared with the suspicion which they felt for foreigners. The one thing that really was the kiss of death was for any Russian to have anything whatever to do with a foreigner. It was bad enough for the unfortunate officials in the Commissariat for Foreign Affairs, who were obliged to have relations with us in the course of their official duties. They showed the greatest reluctance to speak to us or to have anything to do with us. Everybody else, of course, was in an even worse position. As a foreigner, therefore, one lived in a complete ghetto. One was completely cut off from all contact with Soviet citizens.

In the whole of the two years I was there, I never once saw a Soviet citizen come to the British Embassy for a meal or any purpose except perhaps to deliver a letter and then get out as quickly as he could. That was not for want of trying on the part of the Ambassador or the members of the staff. It simply was too dangerous for it to be worth people's while to accept invitations. In a way, that was tragic, because, when left to themselves, the Russian people—and, indeed, all the peoples of the Soviet Union—are immensely friendly, hospitable, gregarious, and there is nothing they like better than to see foreigners.

That is the background of my sojourn in the Soviet Union 20 years ago. There was the reign of terror, the low standard of living, no freedom, nothing like freedom of any kind to do anything, and, in particular, a complete ban on contacts with foreigners. As far as Central Asia was concerned, there was an absolute ban for foreigners to set foot in it at all. When I went, I went by devious routes and with various attendant adventures.

On the occasion of my recent visit, the first surprise was that when I went to the Soviet Embassy in London and said "I understand you are giving visas for tourists to go to Russia" and gave my name—which was no recommendation—they said "All right. We will look into it." Back came the visa. Then I said, "I would also like to go to Turkestan." They replied, "As long as you go as a tourist de luxe"—meaning, in other words, as long as I paid enough—"you can certainly go to Turkestan." That was a promising start.

When I got to Moscow—I spent a week or so in Moscow and two or three weeks in Turkestan and other parts of the Soviet Union—I was struck by a number of things. First, I was struck by the fact that when one went out into the street, the people no longer looked absolutely terror stricken. They were walking about and chatting to each other. The boys and girls were giggling and flirting, as they do anywhere else. It was a much more natural atmosphere. Every now and then, of course, one saw an older person who showed from his face what he had been through during the last 40 or 50 years. But there was no longer the same atmosphere of terror.

I also found that there was no longer the same difficulty about speaking to foreigners. On the contrary, wherever I went in the Soviet Union one had only to sit down on a bench in a park or at a table in a restaurant for half a dozen Soviet citizens to come and talk. Some of the things they said were not at all complimentary to the régime; others were.

I said at the beginning that it was very useful to have a standard of comparison. When I say that it is now possible to talk to people in Russia and that people there no longer look terror stricken, I am comparing what I saw with what I saw 20 years ago. I am not comparing what I saw in the Soviet Union this summer with what one sees in the street in London today. By those standards, of course, there is no doubt whatever that Russia is still a tyranny, a police state. It could not be much exaggeration to say—we have seen examples of it during the last few days—that the people do not have what we call freedom of speech,

freedom of expression or freedom of anything else. But, compared with 20 years ago, however, there is a big improvement.

I will give you an illustration. I was discussing this problem with some foreigners—diplomats, journalists, and so on—who lived in Moscow, and they said that it was very difficult to see Russians. I asked what they meant. They said, " After you have seen any individual Russian ten or twelve times, somebody turns up and gives him a warning and says ' It is not really a very good idea for you to see these foreigners so constantly.' If, after that, he does not pay any attention to the warning and goes on seeing the foreigners, somebody comes to him and says ' This is not doing you any good,' and it is possible that he may lose his job, and so on."

Now compare that with what happened when I was there before. During the whole of the time I was there before, I had what would really be called friendly contacts with only a very few Russians. In almost every case, generally on the second or third occasion that one saw any particular Russian, he or she disappeared within a few hours of one's seeing him, apparently for good. That happened to me several times. Therefore, by those standards, there has been a certain advance now, when it is possible for Russians to see a foreigner a dozen times and then get more or less only a friendly warning.

The other thing I noticed in Russia, and in Central Asia as well, was a considerable advance and improvement in the standard of living. There is much more in the shops. There is more to eat. People live better and, on the whole, life is easier and gayer. There is less straight Communist propaganda. The films that one sees in the cinema deal with ordinary themes, such as boy meets girl, and do not always hammer home the same dreary political message.

That also applies in the Asiatic parts of the Soviet Union, where there always was a lower standard of living, a difference which to some extent still remains. Obviously, people in the outlying parts still live very much as they have lived for the past thousand years or so. On the other hand, in some ways there has been a greater advance in Central Asia than in European Russia, for the reason that the people there started from a much lower level. Here again, there has been a marked improvement, an improvement, that is, by comparison with the Soviet Union of 20 years ago.

Twenty years ago any foreigner in the Soviet Unon, even a shabbily dressed foreigner, stood out a mile. He could be noticed at once. Now, the people whom one sees in the streets of Moscow and in the bigger towns, even though they do not look like the people one finds in Bond Street, in the Rue de la Paix or on Fifth Avenue, do not look so very different from the people to be found in the less prosperous quarters of large provincial towns, even in this country and certainly in the Continent of Europe. That, again, is an advance. What one does not have there is anything to compare with shops such as Marks and Spencer or C. and A. Modes, where, I am told by female relations, it is possible to get pretty clothes remarkably cheap. The prices in the shops in Russia are simply terrific.

There is, of course, tremendous rationing by price, and there is also—

this applies just as much in Central Asia as anywhere else—a tremendous differentiation in wage rates. They vary from what is in practice a starvation wage at the bottom of the scale to wages running into the equivalent of tens of thousands of pounds.

That brings me to the third big change which I noticed: that is, the emergence of a new ruling class, a new aristocracy. This is not a new development, but when I was there before everybody stood a good chance of getting shot, and, on the whole, the ruling class stood a bigger chance of getting shot than anybody else. That did not make for social stability. Now, everybody stands a considerably smaller chance of getting shot or of being pushed off to Siberia. Therefore, the stratification of the society is becoming crystallized and much more permanent. There are not only the people who do the actual job of ruling the country, running the factories, commanding the Army and Navy, being Ministers and the rest of it, but there are their sons, who are also being brought up in luxury, and there will soon be their grandchildren, another generation. That is one development.

The other development is that there are far more educated people. In order to run a technical society, which is what the Soviet Union is becoming more and more, in order to make sputniks and things like that, it is necessary to have a large number of people with technical and advanced education. I have seen the present number of Soviet citizens with advanced or technical education put at about six million. That is a very important change, because those people, the people who are able to cope with these abstruse scientific, technical and other problems, will use their trained minds for working out a lot of other problems too which have nothing to do with science and are not technical. They will turn their minds to the question of how their country ought to be run and whether the propaganda which is pushed out at them really makes sense. They will be much more difficult to bamboozle.

Like almost everything in the Soviet Union, there are two sides to that. Whilst those are the people who are bound to ask themselves questions, and to ask the Government questions, they are also the people who have, in a sense, a vested interest in the continuance of the régime. They are the people who stand most to gain from its continued existence, and as long as life is made sufficiently agreeable for them, they can probably be counted upon not to foul their own nests.

The proviso that life must be made sufficiently agreeable for them is a very important one and something which Mr. Khrushchev has continually to bear in mind. That is one of the reasons for the improvement in the general standard of living, for the fact that more building is being done, that the housing problem is to some extent being faced up to, and that there are more things to buy in the shops and that standards all round are going up a little. There is not enough for everybody—that is perhaps not necessary for their purposes—but there is definitely less stick and more carrot. In fact, there is enough carrot for quite a lot of people to get a chance of a nibble at it and for a lot of other people to hope that if they work and push on hard enough, they may get a nibble too. These are all general considerations which apply to the whole of the Soviet Union.

I would like now to say a word or two about Russian Turkestan and about Central Asia specifically. At the beginning, I referred to all the republics of the Soviet Union. As you know, it is composed of a number of federated republics, all nominally with the right to secede from the Union should they wish (which, obviously, does not mean very much), and all, in theory, self-governing. I have spoken of Sovietization and not Russification, for this reason. It is not a question of their having Russian customs or a Russian way of life forced upon them. There are, of course, examples of purely Russian institutions being spread about. One thing which has happened since I was last there is that instead of using Latin script into which to transliterate their languages, they now use Cyrillic nearly everywhere, at least in all the Central Asian Turki-speaking republics. But, in the main, what is happening is Sovietization and that is producing an effect upon everybody, in all the republics. Everywhere, people listen to the same radio, read what are in effect the same newspapers, see the same films and use the same jargon. There is a regular Soviet "officialese" jargon which is getting not only into Russian but into all the other languages which are spoken in the Soviet Union, to such an extent that one sees the possibility that in 40 or 50 years' time there will be practically a new "Soviet" language.

The policy of the Soviet Government and the central government in Moscow is to encourage, up to a point, manifestations of nationalism such as national dances, and to some extent national art and literature, but, again, provided always that it fits the party line and provided there is nothing that smells of real nationalism about it.

When I was in Central Asia before, most of the population wore the *khalat,* the long, brightly-coloured, striped type of dressing-gown which is their national dress. I have always found these garments very useful as dressing-gowns, so I decided to buy myself one, as I had done before. I asked where I could buy one and we went all over the bazaar and elsewhere. There are still quite a lot of people who are wearing old ones, but in Bokhara and other places there was apparently no such thing as a new *khalat.* "We have left all that behind," they said. To some extent, therefore, even the national dress is disappearing and its place is being taken by ready-made European suits from Moscow. That is not the case everywhere, however. In many places, one still finds the national dress, but habits such as women wearing veils, although they still exist, are strongly discouraged by the Party propagandists.

A typical example of the extent to which these national trends are encouraged or allowed in art and other directions is the sort of architecture now to be seen in the new buildings which are going up everywhere in places like Tashkent and Central Asia generally. In Tashkent, for example, an opera house has been built in an official sort of "Regent street" nondescript classical style. But, looking at it carefully, one sees that it has little Oriental motifs worked in. Anybody who asks what it was would be told that it reflects the national architecture of Turkestan.

When going to the opera, as I did in Tashkent, one sees what is called an opera dealing with an historical theme out of the history of Turkestan. The singing is in Uzbek, the actors are all natives of the country and they

all wear magnificent dresses. But, although the scenery is all accurately copied, one has the feeling that it is no more genuinely Uzbek in spirit than *Madame Butterfly* is expressive of Japanese culture or *Chu Chin Chow* of Chinese. It was very much a sort of Christmas pantomime performance.

As for the government of all these countries, the members of the government are nearly all natives of the country. In Uzbekistan, the country of which Tashkent is the capital and which includes Bokhara and Samarkand, all the ministers are Uzbeks, or perhaps there are one or two Russians to represent the Russian minority. On enquiring further, however, one discovers two things. One finds, first, that the man who commands the troops is not an Uzbek but a Russian, while a lot of the troops themselves are either Russian or troops from other parts of the Soviet Union, so that if any trouble arose they would be loyal to Moscow. The other feature is that control is exercised from Moscow very largely through the Communist Party. To some extent, therefore, it is only a façade of national independence. It is, however, an interesting pattern and one which, I think, in the long run will successfully steamroller out any remaining traces of what in the earlier days used to be called bourgeois nationalism in these subject republics.

One has to remember, of course, that many of these people had a fairly miserable time before the Revolution. They had low standards of living, and so on. In some cases, their standard of living has materially improved. Of course, it might well have done so if Russia had continued as an empire. But the fact is that the younger people do not remember much about that and the people of, say, my own age remember what I remembered from before the war, that life was much nastier then than it is now. Therefore, on the whole, there is not very much in the way of discontent on this score. Nor does one find any very obvious hatred of Russians as such. It does not occur to anyone to call them colonial oppressors, although that, of course, in a sense is what they are.

That is a point that might be made occasionally in answer to some of the charges that are always being levelled against Her Majesty's Government. People are always talking about British Imperialism. But people forget that a large part of the Soviet Union is inhabited by races who are not Russians at all or anything like them . They are no more Russians than the inhabitants of Birmingham are Chinese. For the most part, they were bludgeoned into submission by force of arms sometime or other over the last 100-150 years, some as recently as 1880 or 1890. That is something that we might well say in our own defence occasionally when we are accused of being colonial oppressors and imperialists.

One place where I went and where tremendous development is taking place is the Soviet Socialist republic of Kazakhstan. I do not know how many of you have given it any thought as a place, but an interesting fact about it is that it is the size of the whole of Western Europe put together; in fact, a big country. It has a population of about eight million, so there is plenty of room for expansion. Its capital, Alma Ata, has increased enormously and has only become a great city in the last thirty years or so from a very small Russian settlement. Now, it is the scene of Khrushchev's

great experiments of bringing under cultivation enormous areas of country in a desperate struggle to make Soviet agriculture pay.

The surviving Kazaks, who used to be vague nomads, wandering about looking after their herds and flocks, now come into this great new city of 300,000 or 400,000 inhabitants. They see all the cinemas, television sets, trains, trams and the rest, and a lot of them are greatly impressed. That is what one must remember.

Twenty years ago, and much more so thirty or forty years ago, the biggest problem of all in Central Asia for the Soviet Government was the problem of the Mohammedan religion. That was where they met the strongest opposition to Communism, and that was their target No. 1. At that time, the Mohammedan religion, like all other religions in the Soviet Union, was being savagely persecuted. This time, I found that that was no longer the case. I talked to various Orthodox churchmen in European Russia and I talked to more of them in Georgia. I went to the Orthodox Cathedral and also to the Armenian Cathedral in Tiflis and talked to people there. Finally, when I was in Tashkent, I had dinner with the Grand Mufti of Central Asia.

What the Grand Mufti said to me corresponded roughly with what the Christian Church leaders said to me too. They both said that during the war, the Soviet Government had found that believers, whether Christian or Moslem, were not necessarily unpatriotic and that the Orthodox Church in particular was prepared to throw its weight behind the war effort against Germany. From then onwards, the Church was treated much better. That process has, I think, gone on, and now all the churches —in return, it must be said, for a certain amount of compromise with the secular authorities—enjoy a certain freedom from persecution.

They are not subsidized by the State. The Mufti told me that he got no money at all from the State. He depends entirely on voluntary contributions from his own flock, as do the others, but he gets plenty of that. There has also been a change since before the war, when the authorities used to deal with mosques or churches by suddenly imposing violent discriminatory taxation. A church would suddenly be taxed out of existence, or the town planning would be arranged so that a church either, in Moscow or elsewhere, invariably came in the way of a big new boulevard. That is no longer the case. The authorities even help to rebuild churches and mosques and to keep the existing ones in a good state of repair. The Mufti told me that there were far more people now going to the mosques and worshipping than ever before. He had also been given new facilities, for instance, to print the Koran for the first time since the Revolution.

Of course, there are two sides to this too. Some experts assure me that the reason why the Soviet authorities give Christians and Mohammedans a greater degree of freedom, a greater degree, not of encouragement, but of tolerance, is that they have come to the conclusion that they have nothing whatever to fear from them and that, if left to themselves they will, in the ordinary course of events, simply die a natural death. On the other hand, other experts point to the increasing numbers of people in the mosques and in the churches and say that the Government have involun-

Sir FITZROY MACLEAN: No. The Bokharan Jews have been there for hundreds, if not thousands, of years, but they wear little round fur caps, rather like pill-box hats.

(*Two films were shown between various questions and answers.*)

The CHAIRMAN: All I can do now is to thank Sir Fitzroy Maclean on your behalf and ask you to show, in the usual manner, your appreciation of his lecture.

The vote of thanks was accorded by acclamation and the meeting then ended.