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SOVIET CENTRAL ASIA

By ERIC DOWNTON

11/10/85 Report of a lecture delivered to the Royal Central Asian Society on Wednesday, January 26, 1955, Admiral Sir Cecil Harcourt, G.B.E., K.C.B., Chairman of Council, in the chair.

The CHAIRMAN: Mr. Downton, who is going to talk to us this afternoon, is a Canadian by birth. He spent some three years on the Atlantic as a Canadian Naval Officer during the last war. At the end of the war he returned to his journalistic work and has been a Staff Correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph* since 1947. He has served in most parts of the world, including the Middle, Near and Far East. He has reported most of the post-war military campaigns, including fifteen months covering the Korean war.

In 1953 he was a *Daily Telegraph* correspondent in Moscow, which he was re-visiting after an absence of six years. He was for some months the only representative there of a British daily paper, apart from the Communist party's *Daily Worker*. It was during that period that he undertook the journey to Soviet Central Asia, it being the first time for twenty years that a British non-Communist newspaper correspondent from Moscow had been able to visit that area.

Mr. Downton has come over from Germany this morning, thanks to the weather being fine enough, and we are especially grateful to him for making that effort in order to come to speak to us. We now look forward to his lecture.

THE journey of which the talk today is the subject was, as the Chairman has indicated, made a little over a year ago. Unfortunately, the type of vagabondage which is the lot of a Foreign Correspondent has prevented me, until today, having the privilege of appearing before you. But from what I have heard since from my non-Russian friends in Moscow I believe my general impressions of a year ago are still valid.

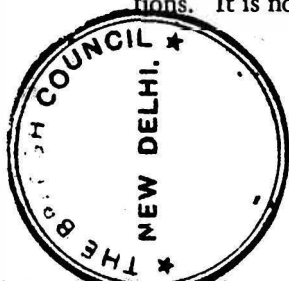
I should explain that I was in Moscow as a correspondent. Since June, 1953, as part of the tactical manoeuvres which are included in the so-called "softening up" following the death of Stalin, travel restrictions have been considerably eased. It was as a result of this relaxation of restrictions that Mr. Harrison E. Salisbury and myself were able to make our journey through Soviet Central Asia.

We travelled by air from Moscow across Kazakhstan to Alma-Ata, the capital of that province, with a stop at Karaganda; then on by overland route from Alma-Ata we went to Frunze, the capital of Kirghizstan; from thence we flew to Stalinabad, the Tadzhik capital, and from there, also by air, to Tashkent, Samarkand, Bokhara and Ferghana, returning by air to Moscow. As the Chairman has said, we were the first non-Communist British journalists to make such a journey for many years, perhaps since before the Revolution. The journey was not officially supervised; it was not one of the famous Russian Cook's Tours. We were on our own to some extent, though frequently under supervision. Nevertheless, within the limits of the trip we had freedom of action.

Incidentally, since I was last in Moscow in 1946, there had been a remarkable improvement, amongst other things, in the airline communications. It is now possible to travel very widely throughout the Soviet Union

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by very reasonable airlines, of which there are two categories, the "soft," which is slightly comparable to a European air service, and the "hard," which is rather like flying under Service conditions. The air links, on the whole, are reasonably good.

GENERAL FEATURES OF SOVIET ASIA

As you are all aware, Soviet Central Asia comprises four Republics—Uzbekistan, Tadzhikistan, Turkmenistan and Kirghizstan—and extends from the Caspian Sea in the west across to the Chinese frontiers in the east. In the north the area borders Kazakhstan and in the south Afghanistan and Iran. The population of Soviet Central Asia, as far as it is possible to calculate, is perhaps $11\frac{1}{2}$ million, and the area is about 500,000 square miles. The area certainly contains some of the most unusual natural features of the U.S.S.R. In the north there are extensive deserts, oases and mountain foothills. In the south and south-east there are some of the highest, largest and most glaciated mountain ranges in the world, including the Tien Shan, Trans-Alay, Pamir-Alay and Pamirs.

It is interesting to note that this entire area—to which, it seems to me, there is nothing comparable in the world in this respect—drains into inland sea basins, not a drop flowing into the open oceans. Most of the waterways drain into the two major rivers of Central Asia, the Syr Darya and the Amu Darya, both of which flow into the Aral Sea.

THE ECONOMY OF THE AREAS

Despite the considerable industrial developments, agriculture is still the main factor in the economy of Soviet Central Asia. The main types of agriculture discernible, even on a quick trip, were: firstly, irrigated farming, with extensive crops adapted to that sort of land irrigation, mostly cotton, the greatest contribution of this area to the Soviet economy. Secondly, dry farming, which is chiefly comprised of grain crops on mountain slopes having sufficient moisture to support the crops. Thirdly, lowland livestock raising, including sheep and camels, which is adapted to the dry steppe and desert. Lastly, highland livestock raising of cattle, goats and sheep, which can be carried on in the higher mountain valley pastures. Of all these, irrigated farming is by far the most important; it employs the greater portion of the population and covers more than two-thirds of the sown area, the main crop being cotton. Driving through the area, we noted that the mulberry tree frequently bordered the irrigated fields and that there is an extensive cultivation of the silkworm.

Having passed only three weeks in the area I do not propose to enter into geographical, historical or ethnological details, but in the time available to me now I would prefer to talk, boardly, of general impressions. I should like, if I may, to slightly reverse the customary manner of formal lecturing and give you at this point instead of later my general conclusions as a result of the trip.

CONSIDERABLE DEVELOPMENT

Let us not by wilful delusion or wishful thinking blind ourselves to

the fact that very considerable developments are taking place in Soviet Central Asia and in the neighbouring Sinkiang. Those familiar with Professor Owen Lattimore's works know of Sinkiang's immense potentialities. However, Sinkiang is outside the scope of my talk, though it certainly comes within a regional survey. We can deplore the methods used and the historical events leading up to the present conditions. We can argue as to the degree of achievements, dispute their ultimate significance or durability. But let us admit that a great deal is being done in this area which is likely to grow again in political significance and impact, although it seems to me entirely unlikely that it will regain its old glories, glories of the time when Samarkand and Bokhara were cities of great power. In parenthesis, my own personal feeling is that the next great swing of the centre of gravity of world power will be away, and perhaps more quickly than we would like to think, from its new resting place, North America, to Eurasia, to parts of what are now the Soviet Union and China. What is happening today in Tashkent and Sinkiang and across the immense steppes of Kazakhstan—this will all be a contributory factor to the forthcoming resurgence of Asiatic power.

SOVIET CENTRAL ASIAN IMPACT

Let us not, out of complacency or smugness or any feeling of "cultural" or "technical" superiority, underestimate the impact that these developments in Soviet Central Asia are having on Asia at large. Since making this trip through Soviet Central Asia I have visited the Middle East, Africa, India, Pakistan, Nepal and Afghanistan. Already the impact of the new Soviet Central Asia, whatever we think about it or judge from our point of view, is making itself very much felt in those vital peripheral areas. In some places—in Afghanistan, for example—the process of expansionism and infiltration by Soviet power has begun. In others, notably New Delhi, it is quite remarkable how many people one meets who have been taken—and I say this without disrespect—on the Red Cook's tour of Tashkent cotton-mills and the opera house and to see the irrigation system in Tadzhikistan and so on. It is significant how impressed these people have been. Tashkent, too, has a more literal "voice"—one of the most powerful radio stations in Asia, from which a very strong and constant wave of propaganda goes out to Asian ears. And Asian ears, eyes and minds and hearts are certainly far more attuned to the message from Tashkent than perhaps we are ready to admit. All who have recently visited countries east of Suez must have been struck by the growing spirit of what I suppose we might call emotional pan-Asianism and, since Korea and Dien Bien Phu, by the notable decline in Asian respect for European morals and strength.

A SELF-CONTAINED AREA

Economically, industrially and militarily, a self-contained—but far from autonomous—area is being created in Soviet Central Asia, which is very much part of the pattern we see in other peripheral regions of the Soviet Union: in the Far East, and so on. This has obvious advantages in a country whose internal communications are still relatively under-developed.

It removes a good deal of strain from railroads, air-lines and domestic communications.

A very strong impression is the fact that Moscow's grip—when I say "Moscow's grip" I mean the Western grip—and imprint on these regions is both obvious and depressing. The party organizations; the format and contents of newspapers; the programmes in the opera houses ("Yevgeny Onyegin" in the ornate Tashkent opera house and "Madam Butterfly" in Stalinabad!); the theatre play-bills; the same old slogans in the "Parks of Culture and Rest"; the restaurants with their frightfully slow service, where even the food has little of local variety except mediocre shashlik and pilaff; the stores, a fly-blown replica of the poorer stores in Moscow; the same kind of bookshops and the same books; the large numbers of Western Russian officials (every official of Central Asian nationality seems to have a Western Russian opposite number); in particular, some industries strongly staffed by Western Russians; the presence of Western Russian troops and frontier guards—in every way there is undeniable evidence of the control of these areas by Western Russia.

There is certainly no colour-bar. On the other hand, the encouragement of local minority cultures, about which we hear so much in Soviet propaganda, is an extremely limited matter, mostly confined to rather precious art displays, folk-dancing, production of the odd newspaper in the local language, and so on.

RELIGION

Another general impression is that throughout Soviet Central Asia there is a good deal of evidence that the Islamic religion is still offering very stubborn resistance to the indirect Communist efforts to stifle religion. One sees in the theatres, in the opera houses, in the museums, in the newspapers, many slogans referring, for example, to "remnants of feudal bey mentality." The Citadel in Bokhara has been converted into an effective museum, the object of which is to show the horrors of life before the Soviet régime. There is so much protest against the traditional aspects of Islam that one might be led to think that there is much concern over religion's continuing hold on the people. Undoubtedly this indirect anti-religious propaganda is having an effect. I remember, for example, sitting in one of the few mosques I could find in Samarkand. The congregation was composed mostly of middle-aged or elderly people. Afterwards I was shown round the mosque by a charming old mullah. We had some general conversation and then I attempted, perhaps rather rashly, to bring the subject round to the dissension between Islam and Communism, whereupon the mullah shrugged rather resignedly, stroked his fine white beard, and said: "Well, you know, many of our young men and boys do not so often follow the ways of their fathers." The subject was obviously rather embarrassing to him. He saluted and walked away. In rather a different aspect, in Bokhara, there is a remarkable old sect of Bokharan Jews. I visited their synagogue, a primitive type of synagogue, its ornaments mainly beautiful old Bokhara rugs. Here again the congregation appeared to be mostly middle-aged and elderly, and the Rabbi made a similar regretful reference to young men being interested in other

beliefs. It is obvious that there is a great draining away from the old faiths. There were a few other minor cases of people hinting about suppression of important rights—but as elsewhere in the Soviet Union, no one really dares speak his mind to a foreigner.

If I may recapitulate, these are some of the major general impressions: considerable material development, although there are plenty of wide, primitive patches in this development; the impact this development is having on neighbouring countries which are of great concern to us—Persia, Afghanistan, Nepal, etc.; then the terribly harsh orthodoxy, the bleak mould, being forced on these regions by Moscow's heavy hand; the complete political control from Moscow; the continuing conflict between atheistic Marxism and the religious creeds, especially Islam.

SCENES ON THE JOURNEY: KAZAKHSTAN

May I now turn to some discussion of the journey itself? The flight from Moscow to Alma-Ata brought some tantalizing but incomplete glimpses of the tremendous industrial development which is going on in Kazakhstan, something we seldom hear about in the outside world. Kazakhstan is undoubtedly one of the world's great new areas of primary development. It is the second largest Republic in the Soviet Union, a vast, flat land about 1,070,000 square miles, one-third the size of the United States of America. It has enormous fuel bases. We came down in the Karaganda, in the heart of the great coal basin, the last stop before we arrived at Alma-Ata. In 1926 Karaganda was a hamlet, according to the Russian text-books, with 150 people; today it has, perhaps, 500,000 inhabitants and is the centre of a very large industrial complex. There is a vast coalfield and also extensive copper deposits at Dzhezkazgan and Kounradsky. Among other enterprises are the manganese mines in the Ulu-Tau range, developed during the last war to replace mines in areas occupied by the Germans. Kazakhstan, oddly enough, has a very large fishery industry because it includes part of the northern reaches of the Caspian Sea, part of the Aral Sea and part of Lake Balkhash.

The point I want to make is that Kazakhstan is an area in which there is tremendous development taking place and, bearing in mind the qualifications already mentioned, it would be most unwise to underestimate these developments. Alma-Ata is the capital, and in the Kazakh language the name signifies "The Father of Apples," because Alma-Ata is situated in very pleasant orchard country.

KIRGHIZSTAN

We travelled from Alma-Ata to Frunze in a truck, built over with a wooden body and with no springs, so that the journey, much of it across open, roadless steppe, was by no means comfortable. Rather ironically there was on the truck, officially designated an omnibus, a notice: "First four seats for invalids and pregnant women"! On leaving Alma-Ata we crossed the Chu range and ran into one of the fantastically primitive patches which still exist in this area. It was rather like turning a corner and meeting the hosts of Jenghis Khan; we were suddenly in a community living on horses—men, women and children riding little shaggy

ponies and wearing their felt hats and high boots, all reminiscent of what one had seen on old scrolls and manuscripts in Peking. We were, in 1953, back among the people familiar to Jenghis Khan. There were occasional rather primitive collective farms. Sometimes we saw riders in full cry after some invisible quarry, paced by a pack of what appeared to be shaggy greyhounds. The road across the area, where it does exist, is a crude track. We came jolting down into the Chu valley and Frunze, the capital of Kirghizstan, at the foot of the Kirghiz range.

In Frunze one sees some rather odd contrasts—engineers from the nearby uranium mines coming into town and lining up in the stores side by side with our friends from Elecker's "Golden Road."

Kirghizstan is rich in uranium, mercury, lead and tungsten. The major uranium workings are at Maylysay, about 150 miles south-west of Frunze, and at Tyuya-Muyun, 100 miles further south. By all accounts, quite considerable uranium mines.

TADZHİK

From Frunze we flew to Stalinabad, capital of the Tadzhik Soviet Socialist Republic. On the way one gets a distant prospect of Stalin Peak, 24,585 feet, the highest point in the U.S.S.R., in the Pamirs, called here "The Roof of the World," and near which is the Fedchenko glacier, according to Soviet text-books the longest continental ice-stream in the world.

Stalinabad, although drab and having some very bad slums, gives an impression of bustle and "Get-up-and-Go." There is a strong party organization, with personnel brought out from Western Russia. Incidentally, here we found a first-hand example of the way in which European minorities have been strewn around in this area. We accidentally encountered a young German taxi-driver, who somewhat reluctantly and carefully told us his story. His family was among groups of Volga Germans who had been moved during World War II and dropped out here under somewhat fierce conditions. They had since created a small community of their own and he took us to see a group of houses or huts which the Volga Germans had built—very primitive but very clean. They were not allowed to have German lessons in the schools or to receive German literature, although they said they could occasionally listen-in to German broadcasts. The taxi-driver told us that there were considerable groups of Bulgarians, Latvians, Esthonians and other victims of enforced removal who had been brought into the area. Although apparently they had a good deal of local liberty, they could not move outside the general area; they could go to school and get jobs there. The conditions under which they live are very harsh.

Flying into these areas one sees something of the very extensive irrigation systems which are being built through Tadzhikistan, mainly in the valleys of the Ferghana, Gissar and Vakhsh rivers, where it is said there is fairly extensive cultivation of long-staple Egyptian cotton. Irrigation is a notable feature of this area.

Tadzhik Soviet Socialist Republic has a population of 1,600,000, and it is situated in the extreme south-east of Soviet Central Asia. In the east

it borders on China, in the south on Afghanistan. Only a narrow tongue of Afghan territory separates it from Pakistan. It is the smallest of the Central Soviet Asian Republics.

UZBEKISTAN

We went—this time by “hard” air travel—from Stalinabad to Tashkent, which is the real hub of Soviet Central Asia. It is the capital of the Uzbek S.S.R. Uzbekistan, with 6,500,000 inhabitants, is the most important and most populous of the Republics. In area it is 157,400 square miles, about one-third of Soviet Central Asia. It has over half the population; one-half the sown area; four-fifths of the cotton area; four-fifths of the industry; two-thirds of the railroads; and most of the larger cities.

Tashkent is a disappointing city. Although it dates from the seventh century, there are very few signs of antiquity. There is a good deal of shoddy building taking place, but it is the centre of a very remarkable new industrial complex. The teen-aged towns are changing the face of Soviet Central Asia. Adding to the industrial potential of the Tashkent zone is Farkhad, a hydro-electric station on the Syr Darya near Begovat, completed after the war.* Chirchik, another of the teen-aged towns, 15 miles north-east of Tashkent, also has a large hydro-electric station and a thriving chemical industry, specializing in nitrogen fertilizers. Angren, 45 miles south-east of Tashkent, another new town, is a large coal-mining centre. At Almalyk, near Angren, a copper refinery has been built. In Tashkent there is also the largest textile concern in the Soviet Union. Much of the machinery used there was sent from England before the war, and some of the original technicians studied in England in the middle 1930s. There are many other industries in the area; in fact an effective industrial complex is being created—all new, but very drab.

The most impressive building in Tashkent is the opera house, completed since the end of the war. Though somewhat ornate, it is impressive. But it is disappointing when visiting Tashkent to find the familiar Leningrad and Moscow operas being played. To Tashkent comes a constant stream of foreign delegations on conducted tours, mostly from the Middle Eastern and Asiatic countries.

Landing at Samarkand's airfield one's thoughts inevitably turned to James Elroy Flecker's “Hassan” and the Golden Road: but there is little of romance left. On the airfield there was a considerable force of Red Air Force fighter-bombers. On the whole, it was a little disappointing flying into Samarkand in something akin to a rather old Dakota plane, even with a caviare sandwich. There is little left of the antiquity of Samarkand. The bazaars are clean, being closely inspected and controlled, but they are colourless. Occasional small caravans of Bactrian camels arrive; but the caravanserai are carefully regulated, their walls plastered with instructions on hygiene and political slogans.

Most of the monuments remaining in Samarkand are those which are associated with Tamerlane, including his tomb; the three maddrasseh around the Registan—Tillikari, Shirdar and Ullug-Beg; the ruins of his

* Begovat, seventy miles south of Tashkent, has in the past ten years developed into Soviet Central Asia's major metallurgical concern.

summer palace (the Shah Zindeh); and another maddrasseh, built by one of his wives, Bibi Khanum, after his death. The buildings are reminiscent of similar edifices in Teheran and Shiraz. Everything is in a bad state of preservation. Some half-hearted repair work is going on, but apparently very limited and slow; also there are not very many visitors. The Tomb of Tamerlane is in fairly good condition. It has a very attractive dark blue dome, and an octagonal burial chapel, the walls of which appear to be of alabaster. Some inscriptions in gold on a faded blue-tiled panelling are in fairly good repair. The only other tomb in this chapel, besides that of Tamerlane, is the tomb of his spiritual teacher and guide, Mir Said Berki. Tamerlane's tomb is covered with a single slab of dark green nephrite, inscribed only with his name, devoid of all titles and other flourishes. I looked for but found no sign of the horse's tail, whip and gazelle skin mentioned by such early European travellers as that great Hungarian, Armin Vambery. There was nothing. An old man, possibly a mullah, who showed me round, said the tomb was empty. Tradition has it that the tomb was rifled by vandals long before the Russians took Samarkand. How authentic that is, I do not know. It seems a pity. You may remember Sir Clement Markham's description—that after his death at Otrar in 1405 Tamerlane was "embalmed with musk and rose-water, wrapped in linen, laid in an ebony coffin and sent to Samarkand." There is nothing to recall that.

My Russian text-book, printed in Moscow in 1948, claimed Samarkand as "the oldest city in Asia, dating from the third or fourth millennium B.C." However, the stamp of real antiquity is not to be found. Nowadays the city has not a great deal of character. The population of the area—another cotton-growing area—is said to be about 1,000,000. There is some light industry in the city, some food processing plants, and in the near neighbourhood considerable wheat growing and extensive orchards.

Of all the cities in Soviet Central Asia Bokhara has retained most of its colour and traditional character, despite the grey Communist process of standardization. Here the *tyubitkas*, the embroidered skull-caps, are gayer and more frequent; the women's plaited pigtails are longer, their embroidered dresses brighter. There is an occasional strolling minstrel and story-teller. Now and then even a veil is seen. In the *chaiḱas*—tea-shops—one sees customers sitting cross-legged on the tables, sipping tea, pulling on home-made hookahs and gossiping with all the East's supreme contempt for the passage of time.

Some of the old walls and arches remain, although they are festooned with loud-speakers and with banners bearing the same old slogans seen everywhere in the Soviet Union. The Park of Culture and Rest is the same as that seen in any Volga town. There is an old maddrasseh which has been converted into a Marxist library, but in spite of that it maintains a good deal of its old character. The old citadel has been preserved as a museum, while the summer palace of the last Emir—Olim Khan, who fled to Afghanistan in 1920—is maintained as a show-place, with all its tawdry garishness, for propaganda reasons. The so-called Tower of Death, from the top of which the criminals used to be hurled to death, still stands. There are a few disused mosques, in a bad state of repair.

According to Soviet text-books the Bokhara district today has a population of about 500,000. A few miles from the old city is the New Bokhara—or Kagan—an incredibly dreary place, built in recent years as a railway centre on the Trans-Caspian railroad.

There is a trade in karakul skins, the processing still being a Bokharan speciality. The handweaving of the famous rugs has almost died out. Apparently a small number are still being made for artistic display and occasional gifts. It is sad to think that so much of the individual character of the city has gone. Walking out past the slogans, the rolls of honour, and pictures of local Stakhanovite workers, to board the plane at the airfield, I wondered how the ghost of Avicenna—that universal genius, probably the greatest of Muslim philosophers and the physician in whom Arab medicine reached its culmination—would react could he revisit his birthplace today.

Airborne once more, we headed for Ferghana, the main town in the Ferghana valley, in east Uzbekistan, the largest oasis in the Republic. My text-book on Soviet Central Asia, bought in Moscow, said it was a cotton and silk textile centre, and went on to give a description of the Ferghana valley which reminded me of Kashmir, and I thought I was coming to something reminiscent of the beauty of that place. Naturally, I expected a degree of exaggeration, but not as much as I realized there had been when I arrived in Ferghana itself. I found it quite the most dismal part of the tour. Apart from a new ugly hotel and some drab government buildings, there seemed little change since the town saw some desperate days during the Civil War. There were more beggars than I have seen anywhere else in the Soviet Union. In half an hour, during which we were served with some extremely bad pilaff in a fly-plagued open-air eating place beside a dirty river, ten or twelve beggars came to the table, including children, horribly crippled ex-Service men and some old men and women. That was the last point of our tour before we flew back to Moscow.

You will notice that our itinerary left out the remaining Republic of Soviet Central Asia, the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic. Turkmenistan has a population of 1,300,000 and an area of 187,200 square miles. In the south it borders Iran and Afghanistan. I had applied for permission to visit the capital, Ashkabad, but this was refused on the ground that Ashkabad came within the frontier zone still forbidden to foreigners. From Turkmenistan some infiltration of Afghanistan is going on.

So, for the reason I have explained, it was with Ferghana, and not Ashkabad, that I ended the tour and flew back to Moscow—the undeniable centre of government and power over this little-known region.

Sir CLARMONT SKRINE: Did the lecturer hear anything of the "Davidrov Scheme" to make a gigantic barrage at the junction of the Ob and Irtysh rivers which flow into the Arctic Ocean and divert their waters, together with that of the Yenisei, into the Aral Sea? Or of the Aral-Caspian canal project which is to raise the level of the Caspian from the same source and also divert the water of the Oxus into the Caspian?

Mr. DOWNTON: How far that has gone, I do not know. There was a

report about eighteen months ago that work had been suspended. In connection with the Ama Darya canal there was a considerable amount of work started, but about eighteen months ago it was admitted that the work had ceased. Whether it has been restarted or not, I cannot say.

Mr. M. PHILIPS PRICE: Could Mr. Downton say what form the infiltration into Afghanistan is taking? When I was there in 1948 I crossed the Hindu Kush and went down south of the Oxus river, but I did not see any sign of Russia or Russian influence the whole time I was there. I was under the impression that the Afghan Government had matters very well in hand. Has anything happened recently?

Mr. DOWNTON: Mr. Philips Price, I was in Afghanistan about six weeks ago. Colonel Shah, the Pakistani ambassador, and his colleagues are extremely concerned about infiltration, though that is, perhaps, the wrong word to use. There is a great deal of economic activity going on. The Russians have secured contracts for a certain amount of road-making and to build a railway. But the thing which is worrying Pakistan most is the attempt the Russians are making to corner oil supplies. I understand that Pakistan is very anxious that America and England should put oil tanks and so on into Afghanistan very cheaply, but our oil companies are reluctant to do so. The Afghan Government, by all accounts, is sitting on the fence very hard in view of what has happened in Tibet and what is happening in Indo-China. They are sitting on the fence very hard and accepting what is relatively a considerable amount of Russian economic help.

Lady PRATT: I have heard it said that Soviet Central Asia is one of the largest oil-bearing districts in the world. Did the lecturer see any signs of that?

Mr. DOWNTON: No. There is around Tashkent some sign of limited oil exploitation, but I am not aware that there are any strikes in the major sense of the word elsewhere. In Soviet Central Asia there have been strikes, but not major strikes in the way we know them in Canada and so on. Of course the Russians are doing a great deal of prospecting and there may be big results later. I know of no oilfield in Soviet Central Asia which would, in the modern sense, be regarded as a large oilfield.

The CHAIRMAN: If there are no further questions, it remains for me to thank Mr. Downton very much indeed for coming and talking to us and giving us such a very vivid picture of the strange medley of building-up which is going on in Soviet Central Asia, a picture we are glad to have and one which we cannot ignore. Thank you very much indeed, Mr. Downton.

