

Conflict Studies Research Centre



**British Military
Involvement in
Transcaspia
(1918-1919)**

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April 2004

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Key Points

- The Malleson Mission, fighting against the Bolsheviks, was a small, autonomous force operating over large distances and remote from support and supplies.
- Goals and end-states were ill-defined, and the two sponsors often disagreed.
- Local partners were unreliable.
- The strategic situation was complex, confusing and rapidly changing.
- The campaign was largely fought from railway trains.
- Disengagement posed further difficulties.
- "The military situation would be ludicrous if it were not so unsound".

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Executive Summary

In August 1918 Britain sent troops into Transcaspia in Central Asia (approximately modern-day Turkmenistan and part of Uzbekistan). They fought in partnership with the Transcaspian government in Ashkhabad against the Bolsheviks and withdrew in April 1919. The operation was called the Malleon Mission after the general in charge.

There is no modern history of the campaign. Ellis, a participant himself, wrote an account in 1963, but it is somewhat dated as new material has since come to light. This paper re-examines the conduct of the campaign, with particular emphasis on the accompanying strategic and political debate on the British side. The number of troops involved was small - British troops in Transcaspia numbered just under 1,000 - but the strategic issues were large and the setting complex.

British intervention can be seen simply as part of the First World War, a reaction to a threat from German and Turkish forces. At the same time the episode revolves around the protection of India and hence could be thought of as the last stage in the Great Game. Again, it was part of the Russian Civil War, part of the birth-pangs that created the Soviet Union. It was also one of the very first episodes in the long-drawn out 20th century battle between communism and capitalism. Finally, pan-Islamism, and the attempt to whip up extreme Muslim feelings in Central Asia, in Afghanistan, Persia and India was a constant worry for the British authorities.

Against this complex background the various parts of the British government in London, the government of India and those on the spot had to attempt to secure at least half-way accurate information and then reach agreement (never consistently achieved) as to the action needed. Definition of goals was consistently difficult. Then, when intervention was agreed, the problem of which local faction to chose as partner raised its head. And the partner chosen, the difficulty of what promises to make and what commitments to sign up had to be faced.

A small initial advance led, almost inevitably, to further involvement as cogent arguments for proceeding further were found by those in the field. At the same time, dealing with a weak, fractious and corrupt government the British force found itself increasingly taking further political control in order to protect their own position.

All this time there was the practical difficulty of maintaining a force with - for most of the period - an extraordinarily long and difficult line of communication, from India, up through eastern Iran to the border of Russia, and then extending further up to the ancient city of Merv. The military situation was consistently fragile, especially working with military partners whose willingness to fight rather than run away or pillage could not be guaranteed. General Milne, who reviewed the situation in January 1919, reported that his view of the military situation was that it would be ludicrous if it were not so unsound.

The final problem that then had to be faced was of withdrawal without loss of troops, or honour, or the immediate defeat of the Transcaspian government shorn of British protection.

British military involvement in Transcaspia seems like an echo of a distant past, but the issues that faced General Malleon and the British government have a strikingly modern ring.

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“The position in Russian Turkestan was obscure.”¹

“I confess to feeling grave uneasiness about this matter.”²

“A historian tidies up events to establish a neat framework – when in reality lots of frightened people were running around not knowing what to do.”³

Introduction

This essay uses the term Transcaspia, as it was the name universally employed by the British at the time. The term has fallen out of use, but meant the area north of Iran and Afghanistan, with the Caspian Sea to the west. To the north-east was the emirate of Bokhara, with the Amu Darya a rough boundary; to the north was the khanate of Khiva. It was a geographical term rather than a political one, though, as we shall see, there was, briefly, a Government of Transcaspia. The area was part of the Russian guberniia of Turkestan. There is a contemporary map at Appendix 1⁴.

There is no modern scholarly work that treats solely of the British military intervention in Transcaspia. Ellis’ “Transcaspian Episode”⁵ is helpful – and Ellis was a participant in the campaign – but it is now somewhat dated, having been published in 1963. Since then we have had the publication of memoirs such as those by Uloth⁶ and Teague-Jones,⁷ and the republication of the Official History “Operations in Persia 1914-1919” by Moberly, which is an invaluable source (the original version of this was apparently not used by Ellis for some reason). In addition, there are a considerable number of archival papers, such as the Milner Papers at New College Oxford, and the relevant India Office Library files. A number of the latter have been consulted in preparation of this essay.

The essay focuses on the period when British troops were in Transcaspia, from August 1918 to April 1919. Using the new material available, the aim of the essay is to re-examine the conduct of the campaign and the political context in which it took place, looking in particular at the accompanying strategic and political debate on the British side. The sources that have been used for the essay are in English. That means that there is in-built bias – even though some of these writers have examined a number of Russian and Turkic language sources – which it is important to recognise at the outset.

The number of troops involved in military operations in Transcaspia was small, indeed alongside the numbers fighting on the Western front, insignificant. However, this is counter-balanced by the magnitude of the strategic issues and the

complexity of the setting. The forces were small, but the political issues were large, complex, confusing and fast-changing.

It is perhaps helpful to remind ourselves of some of the various ways in which the intervention can be viewed. It can be seen simply as part of the First World War; Britain was facing a strategic threat from Turkish and German forces and reacted accordingly. Alternatively, the episode revolves around India and British attempts to protect the jewel in the Imperial Crown. So, with Russian and British troops facing each other in Central Asia it might be thought of as the last stage of the Great Game. On the other hand, starting from the Russian perspective, the fighting can be considered as part of the Civil War that wracked the country from 1918 to 1921, and hence as part of the birth-pangs of the Soviet Union. Or, as part of the Soviet attempt to hold on to the lands bequeathed it by its Tsarist predecessor. Then again, the intervention can be viewed as one of a number of attempts by Western powers to put down the Bolshevik movement at birth – and as an initial stage of the 20th century battle between capitalism and communism. Finally, the themes of Pan-Islamism and pan-Turkism move across the stage we are viewing.

These perspectives combine and make of a seeming simple melodic story a complex symphony. Hence it is, that before diving headlong into details of military operations it is necessary to sketch in the strategic background. We start with Turkestan.

Background – Russian Turkestan

Russian Turkestan⁸ in mid 1918 was a mess. Following the successful Bolshevik revolution the Tashkent Soviet had taken power on 13 November 1917. However, in the same month the Cossack leader Ataman Dutov took Orenburg and communication with Moscow was cut. This was to provide one of the themes for the next two years. At times the communications with Moscow were re-established, but only temporarily. And even then, there was little help that could be given. The Bolshevik government was fighting for its life on several fronts, and the Turkestan front was far from being the most important. During this period the Tashkent Soviet was very much on its own.

Things did not go well. In December 1917 the Alash Orda declared autonomy in Kazakhstan, and were to link with the Cossacks under Ataman Dutov and other leaders so that by the summer of 1918 almost all the Kazakh steppes were free of Bolsheviks. In January 1918 Khokand declared its autonomy. The Tashkent Soviet brutally crushed what it saw as a revolt, with more than 14,000 people dying in the massacre. Famine followed with Etherton, British Consul General in Kashgar, estimating 900,000 deaths.⁹ Basmachi activity then grew in Ferghana. Early in 1918 the Turkmens under Junayd Khan took Khiva. He pursued an openly aggressive policy¹⁰ toward Soviet Turkestan. Bukhara also was a problem to be solved, the Emir representing a potential threat to the regime. To meet the threat Tashkent Soviet leader Kolesov led a delegation to Bokhara in March 1918. Most of the delegation was killed; the peace treaty that was signed put Soviet-Bokharan relations on a formally correct, peaceful basis, but with Bokhara's effective independence the Tashkent Soviet remained in a continual state of alarm about the Amir's dealings with Afghanistan, with the British and with various White elements.¹¹

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Quite apart from this extraordinary catalogue of military and political threats the Tashkent Soviet had economic problems of the first order. Not surprisingly, given the situation, the economy had collapsed; the inability to export cotton through closure of the line to Orenburg did not help. Again, the increasing lawlessness, the decay of the irrigation network and the impossibility of importing food into the region meant famine – not just in the parts controlled by the Tashkent Soviet, but throughout much of the area. The Tashkent Soviet also had to rule, or chose to rule Turkestan from a very narrow power base. Political discrimination against the Moslem population was evident from the start of Soviet rule,¹² and, with exceptions, the Tashkent Soviet ruled simply with Russian support. And within the Russian community the support was again limited to a relatively small number of forceful activists, many associated with the railway.

The Tashkent Soviet was thus a beleaguered state. What it needed even less than a hole in the head was revolt in Transcaspia and invasion by British troops. But that is what they got in July 1918.

From the British perspective, Russian Turkestan moved up the concern agenda when the February 1917 Revolution took place, because of the instability that followed. Worries grew after the Bolshevik Revolution in October 1917 and intensified following the Treaty of Brest-Litvosk in March 1918 when Russia made peace with the Central Powers.

German & Austrian¹³ Prisoners of War

As a sub-title to the brief review of Turkestan this topic merits attention, as it exercised the minds of the British authorities mightily – and, it can be argued, without the prisoners of war the Bolshevik regime in Tashkent would have been over-run.

The number of German prisoners taken by the Russians was relatively small. For the Austrians the figure was high; Krist¹⁴ gives the overall figure as 2,111, 146. A percentage of the soldiers of both nationalities was sent to Turkestan. Denmark had undertaken to take charge of the interests of Austrian prisoners of war in Russia. Brun, who was their “Delegate to the Concentration-Camp Department”, reported that by the autumn 1917 38,000 Austrian prisoners were left alive in Turkestan, 40-50,000 having already died from disease and privation.¹⁵ Later (June 23, 1918) he gives a figure of 3,000 for the number of German prisoners,¹⁶ a figure confirmed by Bailey.¹⁷ The British had reasonably accurate information – the *Summary of Situation in Central Asia May-July, 1918* of the War Office, dated 10 August 1918 states “On the 1st of April, according to registration, there were 38,000 prisoners of Austrian or German nationality in Turkestan and 1,696 officers ...”¹⁸ There are other estimates, but Brun is likely to be the most reliable – and in any case there is no great discrepancy in the figures.

The government of Turkestan brought pressure to bear on the prisoners to enlist in the Bolshevik army – this, despite an order signed by Lenin, Trotsky and Titscherin, forbidding the drafting of recruits from concentration camps and ordering the dismissal of all those already enlisted. When Brun quoted this authority to the President of the Turkestan government, Kolesov, he replied, “This order is nothing but a scrap of paper in our eyes ... Moscow is very far away, we do what seems right to us.”¹⁹

It is not possible to be sure about the numbers that joined the Bolshevik army, but both Macartney, who describes how there was in Tashkent a paper published in German which “incessantly urged the Austrian war prisoners in Turkistan to join the ranks of the Red Army”²⁰ and Bailey put the figure at 50%.²¹ No serious evidence contradicts this figure, but if anything the reality could be higher. Bailey himself later says that “the Red Army consisted largely of prisoners of war”²² and Uloth, later, during the fighting that took place says that nine-tenths of the rank and file were prisoners of war.

The prisoners of war recruited to the Red Army thus played a doubly vital role in the affair we are exploring. Firstly and simply, without them the Bolshevik government in Tashkent could not have survived; they were a key part of their military forces. Secondly, their existence seriously magnified for the British authorities the perceived threat to the protection of India.

Background – Persia, Afghanistan & Transcaucasus

We begin with Persia (as it was then known). Russia and Britain had been struggling for predominance of influence in Persia for most of the nineteenth century; from the British point of view Persia mattered because of its proximity to India.²³ The struggle culminated in the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 which divided Iran into three spheres, with northern and central Iran in the Russian sphere, Britain having south-east Iran as its sphere, and the section in between as neutral.²⁴ The Persians were not consulted before the signing, nor informed afterwards of its terms. Though modified later by the Constantinople agreement of 1915, giving the British a free hand in the neutral zone and the Russians unfettered action in the northern zone, the Convention was effectively in force until repudiated by the Bolsheviks in 1917.²⁵ Britain had a small number of troops stationed in Persia even before the outbreak of the First World War. Thereafter the numbers increased considerably, with troops concentrated in Bushire, in Fars (the South Persia Rifles) and along the southern part of the frontier with Afghanistan. The continuous and growing infringements of Persian independence were taken to be of little account against the British aim of barring the gateway to India by military and political force. Specifically in Persia Britain wished to have a pro-Allied government in power, to counter German infiltration and influence, to provide support for the British troops in Mesopotamia and the Russian troops in the Caucasus fighting the Turks, to counter pan-Islamic propaganda emanating from Turkey and from Germany and to preserve the southern oilfields.

The political power Britain wielded in Iran was based on many things, including bribery. And one might as well start at the top. On 7 August 1918 Sir Charles Marling, the British Resident in Tehran cabled the Foreign Office “... I have agreed to payment to Shah tomans fifteen thousand a month so long as he retains Vos-suk-ed Dowleh in Office and supports him loyally. I am drawing on you for first instalment.” The relevant India Office Secret papers show that these sums continued to be paid throughout the period that concerns us – certainly until September 1919.²⁶

Of course it was not just Persia that was of concern to the British. The Great Game, played out throughout the 19th century, had involved also Afghanistan, Chinese Turkestan (Sinkiang) and the area that became Russian Turkestan. A serious fear for the British throughout the First World War was the worry that the Amir of Afghanistan would join the war on the side of the Central Power; they were

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extremely fortunate that he did not. The Germans were well aware of the prize to be won and despatched a mission through Persia with the aim of persuading the Amir to abandon his neutrality. Though the mission failed in its aim it did succeed in tying up a large number of British troops searching for and trying to capture the mission (and other German agents in Persia). In particular a cordon was set up in East Persia, manned by the Russians in the north and the British in the south to attempt to catch members of the mission as they strove to reach Afghanistan. The British Force, known then as the Seistan Force, in December 1916 totalled over 1,000 British troops and over 1,250 local levies.²⁷

Sinkiang was much less of a worry, but the British felt that events needed watching, particularly after the Bolshevik Revolution.

Transcaucasia did not present a strategic threat to Britain so long as Russia had remained an ally.²⁸ The Central Powers were contained in Mesopotamia. However when the Russian commander in December 1917 agreed an armistice with the Turks the barrier collapsed. The British response was to despatch in December 1917 General Dunsterville with a small force from Baghdad. His original brief was to cooperate with a White Russian force under Colonel Bicherakhov and to try to maintain an effective force on the Caucasus front in order to protect the Russian-occupied portions of Turkish Armenia and so to prevent the passage through the Caucasus of Turkish armies. Beset by difficulties, they were not to get to the Caspian until June 1918.

British Concerns & the Origins of the Malleeson Mission

The most useful documents in tracing the origins of this mission are:

India Office Secret collection of papers "Expenditure on Malleeson Mission and Troops in East Persia, 1918 to 1921. The first of these papers is a "Note by Political Department, India Office, for Eastern Committee" dated 23 April 1918.²⁹

India Office Secret paper "Note on the Malleeson Mission" by H V Cox of the Military Department, India Office, 20 December 1918.³⁰

These papers, being effectively contemporary with events, are particularly valuable; the Official History compiled by Moberly³¹ forms a useful support.

In his entry for East Persia covering September to November 1917 Moberly reports considerable chaos in Turkestan, with mutinous outbreaks leading to a widespread feeling of insecurity and uncertainty.³² This had also spread to the Russian troops holding the northern portion of the East Persia Cordon. It was difficult to obtain information of what was happening in Turkestan; so at the beginning of November, in accordance with instruction from London, the British representative at Meshed (the British listening post for Khorasan, eastern Afghanistan and Russian Turkestan) was instructed to expand his intelligence organisation so as to keep well in touch with developments.

The first paragraph of the Note on the Malleeson Mission³³ encapsulates well the anxieties felt by the British authorities at the time (rightly or wrongly):

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“1. In the beginning of 1918 the rapid spread of anarchy in Russian Central Asia and the very scanty information available as to the course of events there caused considerable uneasiness to His Majesty’s Government, in view of the possible spread, on the one hand, of Bolshevik propaganda and agents into Persia and Afghanistan, and on the other hand, the probability that Turco-German attempts would be made to use the disorder in Central Asia to embarrass our position in India and possibly Mesopotamia. The situation was further complicated by the presence in Central Asia of large bodies of Austrian and German prisoners of war, estimated at over 30,000.”

We move now to the Note prepared for the Eastern Committee (which was the Eastern Committee of the War Cabinet). The first paragraph reads as follows:

“1. The project of sending a British Mission to Turkestan appears to have originated in an informal suggestion made to the War Office by Sir Arthur Hirtzel in December 1917. The first official document on the subject is a telegram from the Secretary of State to the government of India, Army Department, dated the 4th January 1918, to the following effect:-

“Do you think it is practicable to set up British organisation in Turkestan like Dunsterville’s in Caucasus to support anti-Maximalist movement, and have you suitable officers? War Office would be glad if anything of the kind could be done, but have not sufficient information to form opinion.”³⁴

Before considering the government of India’s response it is worth noting that at the end of December they had asked for the northward extension of the British cordon in East Persia, the grounds being the potential danger from the released Austrian and German prisoners of war, the need to replace the Russian troops who were to leave, to check anti-British activities and ensure safety of the roads. This was agreed in early January; the British cordon was to be extended northwards to Sarakhs, reinforcement were arranged, road improvements were to be set in hand and 700 more local levies were to be recruited.³⁵

The government of India replied on 8 January that they did not think it practical to mount such a mission, and that they thought that the Amir of Afghanistan might have to be consulted.³⁶

There are a couple of interesting points regarding the Secretary of State for India’s cabled reply of January 25, 1918, sent after consultation with the War Office and the Foreign Office. Firstly it is the War Office that pushes for a mission:

“War Office consider that, in view of proposed intimate connection between Turkestan and Caucasus, preparation and despatch of suitable Mission to former should be undertaken without delay.”³⁷

Secondly, the telegram continues: “Officers should be accompanied, if possible, by persons qualified to conduct Muhammadan propaganda in favour of the Allies, and every endeavour should be made to exploit anti-Bolshevist and pro-autonomous sentiments.” The reference to “Muhammadan propaganda” is not surprising; it was a hot and live issue. However, to find the reference at anti-Bolshevist sentiments so early is interesting, given that Russia was still at war with Britain’s enemies and

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that the Treaty of Brest Litovsk was not signed till 4 March 1918. Britain's response to Bolshevism was certainly far from coherent in the first year of its existence.³⁸

The Development of the Malleson Mission February-July 1918

The government of India, instructed to get on with it, did so. Having received information during the month that pan-Turkish emissaries had proceeded as far east as Khokand, Ferghana and Kashgar, the Army Department came to the conclusion that the project should be based on two centres, Meshed and Kashgar. Their reply of 2 February 1918³⁹ proposes establishing two centres from which missions "could be sent into Russian Turkestan". One should be at Meshed "dealing with all the country west of the Oxus and the plain country of Bokhara" and one at Kashgar "dealing with Ferghana and Samarkand". They propose General Malleson in charge of the Meshed Mission and Colonel Dew in charge of that based in Kashgar. However, at the same time the Foreign Department of the government of India urged in a telegram of 12 February⁴⁰ that the project should be held in abeyance till a reply was heard from the Amir of Afghanistan, and by pointing out that the object of the proposed Mission was "hopelessly vague".

This gave pause for thought and the emergence of "tentative suggestions" as to the instructions for a possible Mission. These were that the main energies of the Mission should be propaganda among the local Muslim population, thus helping to check enemy intrigues and attempts at penetration; with this aim in mind to strengthen any elements of the population making for stability in the population or likely to provide a barrier against Turco-German schemes of expansion based on "Pan-Turanian" or other ideals.⁴¹

Meanwhile the strengthening of the cordon in East Persia continued and by 14 March it had reached Meshed.

Further India - London debate led (no answer having come from the Amir of Afghanistan) to the announcement by the government of India on 9 April 1918 (the *Note by Political Department, India Office, for Eastern Committee* wrongly dates it 9 March)⁴² that a Political Mission was about to start to Kashgar, and that four officers were being sent to Meshed to work with the Military Attaché there, Colonel Redl, as military intelligence officers, "with a view to investigate possibilities of despatch of military Mission into "Russian Turkestan"". In a following telegram the Military Attaché was given his orders "Under your orders these officers will collect all possible information regarding the situation in Turkestan and get into touch with notables and other elements who could assist in such a Mission. Active propaganda not to be undertaken without orders from here, and Turkestan is not to be entered."

We will return later to the Kashgar Mission, but as regards Meshed there followed a lull; no move was made to despatch General Malleson. However the prohibition against entering Turkestan was apparently lifted as Ullman quotes Redl as reporting on 15 May on the results of his visit there to gain information about Austrian and German prisoners of war.⁴³

During this time things had taken a turn for the worse from the British perspective in the Transcaucasus and by June the outlook was poor. The Turks had soon

considered themselves freed of the obligations undertaken at Brest-Litovsk and moved further into the Caucasus.⁴⁴ They had set up an “independent” republic of Azerbaijan. At the same time the Germans had invaded Ukraine and established complete control of the Black Sea. Georgia had become virtually a German protectorate. Turkish troops were now free to march against Baku and, then, if they could gain control of the Caspian, the way would be free, via Krasnovodsk and the Transcaspian Railway, to the borders of Afghanistan.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff pointing to these developments, added in comments made in the last ten days in June that “... in Turkestan there were 40,000 Austrian and German prisoners of war. The Turkomans and Sarts were all looking it was said, to a British advent to save them from Bolshevism and had sent representatives to our military agent in the Caucasus and to Meshed. If, however, we refused to go to their assistance they would certainly turn to the Germans.” He also advocated sending an officer and troops from Enzeli to Krasnovodsk to get in touch with friendly elements and prevent German agents exporting cotton.⁴⁵

Interestingly enough it appears that it was Colonel Redl who took the initiative by suggesting on 8 June the despatch of an officer into Turkestan to enquire direct into the Bolshevik views and the despatch of General Malleon to Meshed.⁴⁶ This was agreed, not without some doubt on the part of the Government of India. General Malleon was given as his object “to combat German and Turkish propaganda and attempts to organise men, railways and resources towards assisting hostile enterprises, aggression or active operations against us or our Allies.”⁴⁷ On 28 June General Malleon left Simla for Meshed.

In such a free-wheeling, constantly changing situation over such a vast area, with fragmentary and often contradictory information it is possible, in an attempt to clarify what actually happened, to give a wrong impression of coherence and consistency of vision. This was not the case, nor indeed was it possible. There were certain fixed points – the most obvious one being that defeat of the Central Powers was top of the agenda for the British – but they were few and far between in a stormy sea of uncertainty.

One instance may stand as an exemplar for the fog of confusion. At the end of May Redl reported that the Turkestan Bolsheviks seemed genuinely fearful of an Anglo-Afghan invasion and commented that this showed how much the Bolsheviks misunderstood British policy.⁴⁸ However on 21 June the Imperial General Staff recommended inviting the Amir of Afghanistan to occupy the Murghab valley from Merv to Kushk⁴⁹ (the government of India kindly explained that such intervention could well cost the Amir his throne). And on the other hand Bailey in August 1918 writes, “It has been stated that the Amir of Afghanistan had agreed to join with the Central Powers in an invasion of India if a formed body of stipulated strength could be produced could be produced in Afghanistan.”⁵⁰

A further request came from the War Office in a telegram dated approximately 17th June saying that the War Cabinet advocated the interruption of the Transcaspian railway. Moberly, who reports this, has the strange foot-note “Arrangements were made to do this if it became necessary.”⁵¹ This cryptic note seems to make little sense. How on earth could this be done without prolonged military intervention, which at that time was not agreed – and when the necessary troops were not in place? There is a possible explanation in an extraordinary story told by Teague-Jones⁵² (a Political Officer who was to become the Mission’s Political Representative in Transcaspia). He travelled up to Meshed in May 1918 with a certain Lt Ward,

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who was very secretive about his duties. Ward finally divulged that he had been sent by the War Office to blow up the big bridge between Krasnovodsk and Ashkhabad and so frustrate any Turkish advance through Transcaspia. He had travelled round the world via Canada and Japan to that no one could suspect that his ultimate destination was Turkestan. The cunning plan only failed because there was no such bridge.⁵³

Meanwhile, after reporting on 21 June 1918 the visit of a delegate from the Armenian Committee of Ashkhabad asking for assistance of arms and money, Colonel Redl was instructed on 25 June to send a British officer to Ashkhabad to ascertain the facts.⁵⁴ Captain Jarvis was duly sent, and, according to Moberly, reported on 7 July that the Bolshevik leaders in Transcaspia were in Turco-German pay and that he had heard from all classes in Transcaspia that “we were too late to counter the German plans”.⁵⁵ While this might possibly be true, a cable in the India Office archives of 10 July from Redl takes a less alarmist view. It is a summary of the situation in Turkestan as a result of Captain Jarvis’ reconnaissance and other information. The report includes the following: “In Transcaspia there is no Bolshevik organisation for defence from (?) Turco-Germans on the other hand every effort is being made to send to Tashkend men, arms and ammunition against Dutov ... The position of Bolsheviks in Transcaspia is precarious.”⁵⁶

In the meantime, however, Teague-Jones had also (3 July) set out for Transcaspia.

At this time plans for the next forward move were being made, comprising the movement of a small military detachment to Muhammadabad, close to the border, and the natural jumping off point for movement into Transcaspia. Redl refers to the proposal in a telegram of 9 July⁵⁷ and Moberly records that “the India Office telegraphed on the 15th July that it was generally to form a rallying point for pro-Entente parties in Russian territory and to render them all possible support and assistance”. The departure of the detachment was, however, to await General Malleson’s arrival.

Colonel Redl telegraphed on 15 July saying that “The general feeling appears to prevail in ?Turkestan (*sic*) that an anti-Bolshevik movement is imminent.”⁵⁸ Ironically a coup d’état had in fact already taken place on 12 July in Ashkhabad, and it is to this we must turn before concerning ourselves with the arrival of Malleson in Meshed on 16 July.

The Ashkhabad Revolt

For some time there had been considerable dissatisfaction in Transcaspia with the Bolshevik administration. Teague-Jones puts it more strongly “... the Bolshevik authorities in Transcaspia had made themselves very unpopular by their tyrannous and licentious methods. Their intolerant and brutal regime had called forth passive resistance on the part of the workers on the Central Asian Railway, always a powerful element in Transcaspia.”⁵⁹ Following demonstrations against the Tashkent Soviet in Ashkhabad and Kizyl Arvat and the setting up of local committees to air grievances, the Tashkent Soviet responded by sending Frolov, the head of the newly formed Cheka, with a bodyguard of Red Guards to deal with the situation.⁶⁰ Arresting and shooting a number of people in Ashkhabad, he proceeded to Kizyl Arvat. There a determined group of railwaymen shot him and his guards on 12 July 1918. Two days later a government was formed in Ashkhabad, with

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Funtikov, a Socialist-Revolutionary worker as the leader and four other Russians as part of the ruling group. Uprisings in Krasnovodsk and Merv followed.

The new government, which called itself the Ashkhabad Committee – variously described as Menshevik and Socialist-Revolutionary – turned to defence matters and established a makeshift army, moving up to the crossing of the Amu Darya at Chardzhou. At the same time the Committee found it had no choice but to invite the support of the Turkmens, the majority of whom, though suspicious, were ready to make common cause against the Bolsheviks. Colonel Oraz Sirdar, a Turkmen officer of the Tsarist army, was appointed Commander in Chief.

The Tashkent Soviet reacted remarkably fast to these developments, and gathering their forces attacked the Transcaspian force on 24 July, driving them back to a position just east of Bairam Ali, on the edge of the Merv oasis.

The Initial Move into Transcaspia July–August 1918

The first thing that Malleson did on arrival in Meshed was, on the 17 July, to cable his summary of the situation; included in this was a not very perceptive recommendation for support for the Turkestan Union (see separate section on this topic below).

More importantly, on the same day the India Office cabled instruction “to expedite the despatch of the detachment to the frontier, and to despatch British officers or parties across the frontier if they saw an opportunity of rallying pro-Entente forces or of organising resistance to the enemy”.⁶¹ This was bolstered by a telegram dated 24 July from the War Office to the Commander-in-Chief in India which recapitulated that the guiding factor was to afford the maximum possible support to the anti-German elements in Turkestan and Transcaspia, and that the Commander-in-Chief in India was given discretion to move officers and troops to and across the frontier as required for this purpose.⁶²

This was the critical moment, and it is interesting to note that this authority given to the relatively junior general to invade another country at his discretion preceded by some two weeks the landing of General Poole with his troops in Archangel on 2 August 1918.⁶³ Malleson himself later commented on this point: “... the Mission felt that the issue was too large to be decided by subordinate officers, inasmuch as our crossing the Russian frontier would constitute a definite act of war against the Bolsheviks”.⁶⁴

On 19 July the military detachment, some 200 strong, left Meshed for Muhammabad, which it reached on 2 August⁶⁵ and a platoon moved to Kuchan.⁶⁶ Orders were sent to reinforce the East Persia Cordon. At the same time, General Marshall (Mesopotamia) was instructed to send a mission to Krasnovodsk to get in touch with friendly elements.⁶⁷ Teague-Jones had, in fact, already made contacts there.⁶⁸

The Ashkhabad Committee (which was alternatively referred to as the Transcaspian Government) now made contact, requesting assistance. Malleson, reporting this on 1 August, asked for instruction.⁶⁹ The Commander-in-Chief, India replied⁷⁰ on 2 August:

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“It is realised by the C in C that opportunity for action may be lost if you have to wait answers from London to your questions regarding Gustchin and the Menshevik delegates which you refer to in your telegram quoted above. The necessity for taking advantage of any suitable opportunity for despatch of British Officers or parties across frontier has been emphasised by the S of S for India in his telegram July 17th repeated to you under my 356539 MO1 July 19th.

The Baku Coup D’Etat and our present action in Transcaspia may have committed us already against the Bolsheviks.”

He was given a free hand to delay negotiations, or to conclude an agreement, and to choose with whom.

Malleson on 3 August⁷¹ replied that in his opinion it was a unique opportunity to occupy Krasnovodsk, and that “this would secure our position in Central Asia far better than forces in Derbent”. He continues: “It is my opinion that we should openly espouse anti-Bolshevik⁷² cause and secure right of garrison of Krasnovodsk.”

The point regarding openly espousing the anti-Bolshevik cause was taken up in a handwritten Minute Paper to the Under Secretary of State at the War Office⁷³ from Secret Department (sic):

“Subject: The War Affairs in Transcaspia and Turkestan: latest telegrams

The Commander-in-Chief’s telegram No 61001, transmitting Malleson’s No 00416, (Telegram No 2) was not before the Conference on Saturday afternoon, when it was decided to give support to the Transcaspian leaders, ie “openly to espouse the anti-Bolshevik cause”, as General Malleson recommends. No further action seems necessary at this end for the time being.”

Thus we have a defining moment, when a decision was taken, endorsed by the general on the spot and by the governments of UK and India, to embark deliberately on anti-Bolshevik military and political action in Transcaspia. Two things, coincidentally, came together in a crux – the arrival of Malleson and the revolt in Ashkhabad – and pushed forward this move.

Ellis states that “General Malleson despatched a liaison officer, Captain Teague-Jones, to Ashkhabad to negotiate.⁷⁴ Teague-Jones’ version is different.⁷⁵ According to his account he arrived in Ashkhabad on 3 August from Krasnovodsk; in Ashkhabad he met Jarvis, who had been sent by General Malleson to interview the Ashkhabad Committee in response to their application for funding. They negotiated together with the Committee, then Jarvis left to report to Malleson, while Teague-Jones left for Baku. Be that as it may, further negotiations took place on 7 August when Malleson⁷⁶ had a long interview with a representative of the Transcaspian government. Their representative urged that two machine guns should be immediately despatched to the Oxus front. This Malleson agreed to do, as well as sending the Transcaspian government some machine guns, rifles and rifle ammunition.

The crucial date for the invasion was 11 August when two machine guns of the 19th Punjabis left Muhammadabad, crossed the border to Artik and there entrained for Bairam Ali to help the Transcaspian forces meet a new Bolshevik attack. Ullman

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says that they were sent on Malleson's own authority,⁷⁷ but this is only true in a limited sense, because, as we have seen, he had already been given covering authority to take such action. With the machine guns went Major W H Bingham to report on the military situation.⁷⁸

The attack came the next day, with the Bolsheviks mustering a force around 1,000, with a further 2,000 men in reserve. The Transcaspian force of around 1,000 men, largely Turkmens, made only a half-hearted resistance and was defeated. Its retirement would have led to a decisive disaster, according to the official Transcaspian account, but for the Indian machine gun detachment.

“These men fired their guns till they became too hot to handle and, according to the Transcaspian account, inflicted 350 casualties on the enemy. Two of the Indian detachment were wounded and one of its machine guns had to be abandoned after two men had been burnt in trying to carry it out of action.”⁷⁹

The Transcaspian force, completely demoralised, retreated back along the railway line to Dushak, while the machine gun detachment returned to Muhammadabad “*hors de combat* from influenza and casualties”.⁸⁰

The ease with which the Bolsheviks had defeated the motley collection of forces that opposed them, and the fact that it was the British forces that on 28 August at the “Affair of Kaahka”, as Moberly calls it, were primarily responsible for halting the Bolshevik attack and forcing its withdrawal (as we shall see) indicate that without British intervention in all likelihood the Transcaspian government could have been over-run within a very short while. Malleson's action gave the government a brief one-year life.

Contemporaneously with these events General Dunsterville had been advancing with his small force in north-west Iran; a coup d'état on 25 July in Baku had put in power a non-Bolshevik government which asked for immediate British assistance. The Turks were within close distance of the town. Dunsterville's forces started to arrive on 4 August. They were doomed from the start, and on 14 September the Turks broke through the final defences of the city and the British withdrew.⁸¹ As Ullman points out, though they were involved in bitter fighting, and were on Soviet soil, at no time were British troops fighting Bolsheviks – unlike the British force in Transcaspiia.

On 6 August Colonel Battine reached Krasnovodsk from Enzeli as liaison officer with the local anti-Bolshevik authorities.⁸²

Agreement with the Ashkhabad Committee 19 August 1918

British involvement in fighting had begun on 12 August. It remained to conclude an agreement between the British forces and the Ashkhabad Committee. In the negotiations for this Ellis, who was in Meshed at the time, gives much credit to Teague-Jones – “His advice was therefore of the greatest value to General Malleson and enabled the General, in his dealings with Dokhov, to keep the negotiations on a realistic basis.”⁸³ A protocol of an agreement was initialled on 19th August 1918.⁸⁴

The preamble reads:

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“The British Government on the one hand and the Executive Committee of the Transcaspian Government on the other hand, in view of the common danger of Bolshevism and of a Turco-German invasion of Transcaspia and Turkistan, agree to act together with the common objects-

- of restoring peace and good order throughout Trans-Caspia and Russian Turkistan;
- of resisting to the utmost all Turco-German projects of military conquest or political penetration in Trans-Caspia and Russian Turkistan.”

Amongst the undertakings on the Ashkhabad Committee side were the prohibition of the export of cotton (as a strategic war material the British were very keen to ensure none of the great stockpiles could be exported to reach the Central Powers), and the granting of the use of the port of Krasnovodsk and the destruction of rolling stock, water storage, culverts, etc when needed, while the British side included in its undertakings the defence of Baku and Krasnovodsk as long as possible, the supply of arms and ammunition, the participation of British troops and the provision of financial assistance.

The protocol, signed by Malleon, concluded:

“I guarantee the continuance of military and financial assistance so long as your Government maintains itself in power and has as the main plank in its political platform the restoration of order and the suppression of all Bolshevik or Turco-German intrigues or projects for invasion.”

This protocol was never officially ratified by the British Government, and so remained an agreement between the Malleon Mission and the Ashkhabad Committee. Ullman felt that “the government was to feel certain moral obligations toward fulfilling the promises Malleon had made”⁸⁵ and he is probably correct. The protocol appears to have been considered, at least on the British side, as secret. Though it is now available for all to see at the India Office Library, it appears to have been first openly published only in the 1950s.⁸⁶ There is no reference to it in Moberly.

How much Malleon exceeded his remit is an interesting question. Through much of the protocol probably not at all; it ran with the tenor of the various instructions he had received. However the vagueness of the commitment regarding financial assistance, with no details of amounts or dates, was to cause considerable trouble later, and expectations were roused that the British government, as we shall see, was not prepared to meet.

Malleon in the protocol basically got what he wanted, but at the expense of a dangerously open-ended commitment in the final paragraph – a commitment which in the end he could not fulfil. On the Transcaspian side there were worries about infringement of sovereignty but in face of the Bolshevik threat the promises of money and financial help were invaluable.

The Ashkhabad Committee

We have a vivid picture of the Ashkhabad Committee from the pages of Teague-Jones. Particularly where his diary entries rather than later re-worked material are in question, he provides sharp and incisive pictures, which are, however, marred by a degree of arrogance regarding the correctness of his own views – which are intelligent, but not infallible. Effectively it was he who provided the main interface between the Malleson Mission and the Committee; from 30 August he assumed all responsibility as Political Representative in Transcaspia.⁸⁷

The President of the Committee, which comprised 5 members, was Funtikov, an engine driver, a tough man with a weakness for drink. The “Foreign Minister” was [?] Alexandrovich Zimin, a schoolmaster.⁸⁸ Ellis says flatly, “None of these men possessed any outstanding qualities of leadership”.⁸⁹ Both Ellis and Teague-Jones concur that the most forceful personality was a certain Simion Drushkin, who came late on the scene, arriving in Krasnovodsk on September 10 from Astrakhan, then coming straight to Ashkhabad.⁹⁰ In no time at all he was made Chief of Police, and was to play the key role in the crisis that was to develop at the end of December.

The Krasnovodsk Committee, where Kuhn was the real power, considered itself subordinate to the Ashkhabad Committee.⁹¹

The Committee had somewhat varied political views, but the Social Revolutionary Party had a majority. What they did not have was a full Turkmen representative, though a certain Hadji Murat in an *ex officio* capacity represented Turkmen affairs. Intrigue played a large role in the Committee’s activities.

Naturally enough under the circumstances the attitude of the individual members of the Committee varied – and changed with events. And there were cross-currents, as for example a wish for British assistance did not mean that suspicion of British motives did not exist.

The Committee was governed by fear. They had taken arms against the Soviet government⁹² and they knew that they would be shot if the Tashkent Soviet prevailed militarily. Not unnaturally, their priority was to try to prevent this. And it underlay the mismatch in intentions between the Committee and the British. Becker has pointed out, “Whereas Ashkhabad was primarily concerned with the threat from Soviet Turkestan, Britain’s attention was focused on Transcaucasia and the Caspian Sea.”⁹³

In any case, the immediate problems with which the Committee were faced were manifold. There is space only to mention a few. Economically the mini-state was bankrupt. Cut off from the rest of Russian Turkestan and with, effectively, the route via Krasnovodsk across the Caspian Sea unusable for trade, with no way to sell cotton (which the British in any case would not allow, at least not as far as the Central Powers were concerned), and with tax collecting systems in disorder, the economy was shot and the Committee had virtually no income. It is not surprising that they pushed as hard as they could to secure funds from Malleson. Secondly, they desperately needed more troops; their efforts to raise local forces met with very little success. Thirdly, they needed to secure the support of the Turkmens, and to control that support; here there were handicaps, not least Russian suspicion of Turkmen aims.

The Turkmen

When the revolt had taken place in Ashkhabad in July 1918 the Turkmen had come forward and offered to participate.⁹⁴ Teague-Jones reports that in the next two or three weeks there were expectations of the freeing of Transcaspia (the victorious Turkish army was moving closer), combined with the hope of looting. Anti-Russian and anti-British propaganda was disseminated. Then came the British, followed by a period of suspicion and “scarcely veiled hostility”;⁹⁵ the shooting of two British officers in the back that was to occur on 28 August was a symptom of this. Thereafter, particularly in the light of the impressive fighting of the Indian troops, their attitude towards the British became more friendly.

The Turkmen, who made up the majority of the population of Transcaspia, (according to Teague-Jones 65%,⁹⁶ according to Malleson 75%⁹⁷) did not form a coherent group. At the fringes, they were outright free-booters and bandits. Even this was turned to advantage as when Oraz Sirdar, the Commander-in-Chief, used the bandit Aziz Kan - presumably with tacit British agreement - during operations near Merv (having helped the genie out of the bottle, he later had to be put back - it was “necessary to place him under restraint”).⁹⁸

The various tribal leaders were jostling and intriguing for position. However their support was essential, both for the British and for the Committee. In this context Oraz Sardar, though not a strong character, was crucial, as he enjoyed considerable prestige among Turkmen. And despite the comparative uselessness of the Turkmen cavalry for reconnaissance, and the fact that they “had a habit of stripping and killing prisoners and stragglers”⁹⁹ Lieut-Colonel Knollys, in command of the 19th Punjabi contingent and effectively senior officer in Transcaspia for most of the period, had good relations with their leaders and was seriously concerned to continue to have their cooperation.¹⁰⁰

The relations between the Turkmen and the Ashkhabad Committee remained uneasy and led to an incident at the end of October, when, according to Teague-Jones,¹⁰¹ a plot by the Turkmen Committee to overthrow the Ashkhabad government was discovered, after which he mediated between the Russians and Turkmen and brought about peace of a sort.

The Kashgar Mission

Leaving the Transcaspian scene for a moment we detour to follow the path of the Kashgar Mission. This was led, not by Colonel Dew, as originally proposed, but by Major Bailey, accompanied by Captain Blacker and Captain Etherton. They left Srinagar for Kashgar in April 1918,¹⁰² arriving there on 7 June.¹⁰³ Captain Etherton remained there as the new Consul-General, and thenceforth played an active role in Sinkiang in attempting to counter Bolshevik propaganda and infiltration of agents.

On 24 July¹⁰⁴ Bailey and Blacker left for Tashkent, to be followed shortly by Sir George Macartney, who was retiring from the post of Consul-General at Sinkiang and who travelled with Bailey and Blacker to try to help smooth their path. Bailey and Blacker reached Tashkent on 14 August.¹⁰⁵ The aim of the mission was - in Sir George Macartney's words, “to keep ourselves au courant of events there”.¹⁰⁶ As Bailey puts it,

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“The position in Russian Turkestan was obscure. We knew that Bolsheviks were in control but no one quite knew what a Bolshevik was or what were his aims and objects. It seemed that it would be useful to go and see them, and to find out what sort of people they were and to try to persuade them to continue the war against Germany, or at least not to help the Central Powers in the war against us.”¹⁰⁷

In other words, to spy out the land, and to win friends and influence people.

Unfortunately by the time they arrived British troops were in Transcaspia, fighting the Bolsheviks – though the mission did not know this till informed by their hosts, whose imagination, according to Blacker, “boggled at the idea of a British Mission coming to an enemy capital in the same week that a British army invaded the country, as well it might”.¹⁰⁸ As Bailey later pointed out, the Bolsheviks would have been justified in interning the mission.¹⁰⁹ The Mission sidled its way not too convincingly past this problem, being somewhat parsimonious with the truth (the phrase “what a tangled web we weave when first we practise to deceive” passed through Blacker’s mind).¹¹⁰ Macartney related how, on August 26, he and his colleagues openly told the Foreign Affairs Commissary Damagatsky that their objects were:

1. To procure information on the advance of the Germans and Turks.
2. To report regarding the German and Austrian prisoners of war, and the steps the Soviets were taking to keep them interned.
3. To report on the disposal of the raw cotton in Turkestan.
4. To watch over the interests of British subjects in Turkestan.
5. Generally, to find out how far the Soviet of Turkestan was willing to remain neutral in the war.

A meeting on 1 September with the President of the Tashkent Soviet, Kolesov, opened with him saying that the Mission was quite unnecessary – concerning which comment Macartney wrote, “I certainly thought we had been finely trapped, and I had visions of the interior of a Bolshevik jail.” Understandably, with no progress being made in discussions Macartney accompanied by Blacker, whose health was not good, left in mid-September for India.¹¹¹ Bailey remained behind, only to have to go into hiding on 20 October.

Up to that date the Mission had been a failure. Arriving at totally the wrong time for negotiation, through no fault of its own, it had not influenced or changed the policies or actions of the Tashkent Soviet in any way. In terms of gathering information about the situation in Turkestan it had certainly done that, but as Captain Blacker points out, all attempts to send messages out of Tashkent had failed.¹¹² So immediacy of reporting was lost and it was only on 11 October that a summary of the situation in Turkestan derived from their reports was received in Simla by cable from Kashgar.¹¹³ Macartney claimed later that the reports of the officers on military subjects proved very valuable and “would have been of the greatest use to us had the Central Powers not collapsed at the time they did”.¹¹⁴ Possibly so, though one takes leave to be somewhat sceptical. To take one instance only, the Secret *Summary of Situation in Central Asia May-July 1918*,¹¹⁵ produced by the War Office on 10 August 1918, already had a useful compendium of information regarding prisoners of war, compiled without benefit of the Mission’s data.

We will return later to the subsequent journey of Major Bailey.

The Turkestan Union

Before returning to Malleson a brief diversion at this stage to look at the Turkestan Union might be illuminating in trying to picture the difficulties encountered by the British military authorities as they struggled to comprehend the complex and swiftly changing political situation in Transcaspia (it would be fair to say that the majority of the inhabitants of Transcaspia were in any case considerably confused themselves). Finding the right entry point was a challenge, and in this particular case there was a definite false start. However, if duplicity was the main goal, then that was certainly achieved.

The first reference to the Turkestan Union comes in a report on 20 May 1918 by Colonel Pike at Qazvin quoted in the secret War Office *Summary of situation in Central Asia May-July, 1918*.

“... Colonel Pike reported that representatives from Turkestan had been interviewing him and were very anxious for the open support or temporary protectorate of England, and urgently requested the despatch of a small force of English or Indian troops; they also agreed to export half of the two years stock of cotton in Central Asia to the English. Colonel Pike told them that the first proposal was impossible and advised them to call their organization the Turkestan Union. He urged most strongly that all support should be given to them.”¹¹⁶

The report continues that “This was later endorsed by Colonel Redl, who was visited on the 5th July by Junkovksy, representing the Foreign Department of the Turkestan Union”. Moberly¹¹⁷ also reports this meeting with Colonel Redl, who was the Military Attaché at Meshed, though he dates it 6 July 1918.

“Their objects were to reinstate the Russian Governor-General, restore order and prevent a Turco-German invasion; and they asked for British financial assistance, and also, as an indication of moral support, the despatch of a British detachment of two to four hundred men to the Russo-Persian frontier.”¹¹⁸

On this basis, “Colonel Redl was at once instructed from India to advance this movement up to two million roubles and to tell General Dale to hold two hundred men in readiness to move to the frontier from Meshed”. The next day Captain E D Jarvis returned from a visit to Transcaspia and we have the interesting statement, “Though Captain Jarvis had heard nothing of the plans of the Turkestan Union, he considered that such a movement afforded the only chance of keeping out the enemy; but our assistance would be indispensable.” Is it possible that we have here the situation of an intelligence officer putting forward views that he does not truly believe but thinks might be acceptable to higher authority?

Be that as it may, and even though a few days earlier Colonel Redl had reported that plans of the Turkestan Union “were less advanced than he had been led to believe”, on 17 July Malleson, the day after his arrival in Meshed, cabled “The Turkestan Union, which included officers and all the more respectable and stable elements, had monarchical designs. Their representative considered their prospects promising.”¹¹⁹ The *Summary of situation in Central Asia May-July, 1918* records a final interview with Malleson on 18 July when the (unnamed) representative of the Turkestan Union makes wide and generous promises as to what they will do in return for financial and military assistance, including “To keep all cotton stocks

under control of the Union".¹²⁰ This meeting is also summarised in a telegram from Malleson to India¹²¹ dated 18 July where he sets out the tasks he would hope the Turkestan Union would address and records that he had handed over 1,800,000 roubles to complete the 2,000,000 asked for. He adds (ironically enough in the circumstances) that no more money would be handed over till there were signs of progress as the "British government had unfortunate experience of pouring money into Russia without a result".

We thus have a situation where two colonels, Pike and Redl, without any quoted supporting evidence, believe the plausible representatives of the Turkestan Union, Pike kindly gives them a name and through their representations funding is secured for them. They are supported by a junior officer, Captain Jarvis, who finds no corroborative evidence on the spot in Ashkhabad, but broad-mindedly endorses their views, and by a G.O.C who arrives in Meshed on 16 July and after an interview with their representative the next day is happy to endorse them, and give them money.

However, it was all shortly to unravel. Turning to another source, we find a different slant, particularly on the Malleson interview. Captain Teague-Jones, who had arrived in Meshed on 24 June as Political Officer, had been away when the interview took place. According to his account, on his return he found out that "Both Redl and the G.O.C had been so impressed by Junkovsky that they agreed to his request for financial assistance ... and actually gave him bills on London and Calcutta for the sum of something like £25,000."¹²² Teague-Jones, an extremely self-confident officer, took his new G.O.C to task both for handing over this much money and for giving out British bills which would be traceable and provide a propaganda handle. He forthwith went to General Junkovsky, retrieved the money, giving him in exchange £500 in Persian tomans. He comments: "I have never understood how Redl and the G.O.C came to be so impressed with this man".

The Turkestan Union then quietly disappears for a time, though Teague-Jones records meeting General Junkovsky once more on 29 July in Krasnovodsk, lunching with "his secretary, a young but masterly young lady named Lubov Mikhailovna".¹²³ Moberly records simply that by 2 August "... the Turkestan Union had failed to materialise ..."¹²⁴

Another reference in Moberly is illuminating. On or around 6 August General Malleson cabled that "... it was most undesirable to mention the Turkestan Union in any telegram, as the Transcaspian Government, who were unaware of our negotiations with that movement, regarded it as a treasonable conspiracy to be ruthlessly rooted out".¹²⁵

However this danger did not deter Malleson, nor did the failure of the Turkestan Union to actually achieve anything. On 11 October he telegraphed that "a Russian ex-officer and agent of the Turkestan Union" had just visited him.¹²⁶ "The Turkestan Union had a strong party in Tashkend, though their greatest asset was 4,000 good men in Transcaspia, who possessed arms and were ready to rise, when, if they gained any preliminary success, crowds would join them." All that was needed was 2 million roubles, "and General Malleson himself thought that the chances might warrant risking this sum". It is difficult to know whether to admire more the General's double-dealing (it was less than two months since he had signed an agreement with the Ashkhabad Committee) or his naivety, masquerading as cleverness (where and who were these 4,000 good men?).

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The distant War Office showed greater sense than Malleson. They replied that, “as their experience during the past year had shown that financial assistance to anti-Bolshevik Russian elements was useless without material assistance and direction by British personnel, they could not recommend this expenditure”.¹²⁷ Finally the phantom, or near phantom Turkestan Union disappears from the stage of history.

Military Action August-October 1918

We finally return to the campaign itself. Following the retreat from Bahram Ali on 12 August Malleson moved some 500 men of the 19th Punjabis under Lieut-Colonel Knollys across the border, where they joined the Transcaspian force at Kaahka on 26 August.

The Transcaspian force consisted of about 1,000 infantry, whose discipline and organization were poor¹²⁸ (according to Knollys they were mainly Armenians, about whom “the less said the better”),¹²⁹ four modern field guns, four old muzzle loaders, two armoured trains and a few hundred mounted Turkmens. These Knollys described as of no use in attack or defence. However, they did harass Bolshevik looting parties or stragglers and could collect information “usually very belated and very inaccurate”. The nominal Commander-in-Chief was Oraz Sirdar, later Sir Oraz Sirdar K.C.M.G,¹³⁰ a Turkmen chief, son of Tokme Sirdar who was defeated by the Russians at Geok Tepe. Colonel Oraz Sirdar – who in some sources is referred to as General Oraz Sirdar – was a pleasant man without any claim to leadership qualities, but who could at least after a fashion hold the Turkmens together.

The Bolshevik force, with access to the fortress and arsenal at Kushkh on the Afghan border, had much better arms and equipment. They were a “heterogeneous collection”¹³¹ with a large proportion of Austrian prisoners of war. They attacked on 28 August, but were repulsed, mainly thanks to fierce resistance offered by the Punjabis. 3 British officers and 24 rank and file were killed and wounded. Both British liaison officers were shot from behind as they advanced, presumably treacherously. There is no record of the number of Transcaspian or Bolshevik casualties.

The next day a company (120 rifles) of the 1/4th Hampshire Regiment arrived from Krasnovodsk.¹³²

During August the East Persia Cordon Force was reinforced, and a further 600 men were sent from India to help with the road building. From Quetta the extension of the railway line to the Persian border was nearly complete; the Government of India now asked for authority to extend the railway line into Persia as far as Neh (it was finally to reach Duzdab in February 1919).¹³³ It is symptomatic of British disdain for the Government of Persia that it was not from them that permission was sought, but from the India Office in London. Permission was granted a little later. The 800 mile long stretch of communications remained a natural concern throughout the Malleson Mission. Not only did it mean supplies and reinforcements took a long time to reach Meshed and Transcaspia, but the route was flanked by potentially hostile Afghanistan and subject to raids by tribesmen in the Seistan sector.¹³⁴

On 15 September Turkish forces took Baku. They had also, by this date occupied practically the whole of Persian Azerbaijan, and were moving towards Ardebil and Astara. Dunsterville withdrew to Enzeli which was the headquarters of the small

makeshift British fleet under Commodore Norris, and from which Krasnovodsk was supplied.¹³⁵

Two further attacks were launched against the Transcaspian position on September 11 and 28.¹³⁶ Between the two attacks and just afterwards further small reinforcements of the British contingent arrived, including two squadrons of the 28th Light Cavalry from Persia, which was a helpful addition both for reconnaissance and for counter-attack. At the same time Ellis¹³⁷ makes the valid point that Malleson during the period of the Mission did not receive reinforcements from India – and only 120 rifles from North Persia by way of Krasnovodsk. For the East Persia cordon locally recruited levies were raised and extra men sent from India for road-building. However, apart from these, the troops Malleson used were those already in operation as part of the East Persian cordon – he simply re-deployed them.

An event occurred in September that was to be a bone of contention for many years between the Soviet and British governments. This was the incident of the shooting of the 26 commissars. When Baku fell 26 Bolshevik commissars escaped by boat, thinking to go to Astrakhan. Instead, they were brought to Krasnovodsk. Kuhn, effectively the ruler of Krasnovodsk, informed Ashkhabad; the British were also told. The question was what to do with them. At a meeting of the Ashkhabad Committee it was decided they should be shot and this was arranged by Kuhn on the night of 19-20 September. What made this event controversial was the presence of Teague-Jones at the meeting of the Ashkhabad Committee for much of the time. The Bolsheviks soon made the affair into a cause célèbre – both Stalin and Trotsky were to enter the lists – the accusation being that Teague-Jones had ordered the killings. Teague-Jones strongly denied the charge, but there are uncertainties in his account that mean suspicion of a degree of complicity in the decision has not completely gone away.¹³⁸

Meanwhile Malleson was stating clearly to the C in C India his view of the Ashkhabad Committee. He cabled on 9 October:

“The present committee are mainly a collection of insignificant adventurers who by distributing liberal blackmail maintain a precarious, partial and purely temporary control over the armed mob. There will probably be disturbances as soon as their funds are exhausted and as soon as food position becomes acute, and this will be followed by fresh lot of adventurers procuring temporary control.”¹³⁹

His predictive powers were good, as we shall see; his deductive powers less so. Given his analysis of the Transcaspian government one would have thought that Malleson would realise a forward policy would be dangerous – but he did not see matters this way.

By the beginning of October the general war situation had turned in favour of the Allies and “made it clear that no German or Turkish military movements into Transcaspia were at all probable, though the hostile activities of enemy agents would still have to be guarded against”.¹⁴⁰

It is from this point onwards that there begins to be a gap in perception between General Malleson and, in particular, the government of India. In simple terms, General Malleson, the man on the spot (or nearly on the spot, as he still had not at

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this time visited Transcaspia) wished to push further and deeper into Transcaspia; the government of India did not.

The Transcaspian forces¹⁴¹ at this time consisted of approximately 50 Russian cavalry and 1,000 Russian infantry, 7 field guns, and 300 Turkmen cavalry and 150 Turkmen infantry. The British detachment at Kaahka comprised 180 troopers, 28th Light Cavalry, 2 guns, 120 rifles 1/ 4 Hampshire Regiment and 330 rifles 1/ 19 Punjabis. The Bolshevik force was at Dushak.

Plans were now set in hand to drive the Bolshevik army back beyond Merv. What is interesting is that there appears to be no evidence that Malleson managed to secure the approval of higher authority first. Ellis, who was on the spot and presumably part of the decision-making process, says that under the circumstances "... the most dangerous course was inaction"¹⁴² but his supporting arguments do not really bear him out. Certainly it appears true that there was pressure from the Ashkhabad Committee to attack. There is a reference in Moberly¹⁴³ and Knollys recorded:

"This Committee now became most insistent that we should attack, and related all sorts of terrible things that would happen if we didn't advance. The most convincing of these, and one which had the appearance of truth, was that unless we could get the oasis, at least of Tejend, they could not feed the force in winter. Lies and half-truths were well mixed up."¹⁴⁴

It is easy to see why the Ashkhabad Committee would press for vigorous action by the combined force and certainly attack would be in their interests. It is less clear what value the British would gain. Malleson cabled to India on 7 October with a somewhat specious list of arguments for advance. The Commander-in Chief in India commenting to London said that any advance should be limited to an occupation of the Merv oasis and even this should not be undertaken until there were sufficient reliable troops in Transcaspia and the political situation had been fully reviewed.¹⁴⁵ The attack went ahead.

The attack was launched on the night of 13-14 October, with an attempted double night march north and south of the railway line. The battle was hard-fought, with the British (or, rather, Indian) force doing practically all the fighting, as was generously recognised by the Ashkhabad Committee's official account.¹⁴⁶ The casualty figures bear this out. Knollys reported them as:

28th Light Cavalry 6 killed and 11 wounded
19th Punjabis 47 killed and 139 wounded, which represented 100% of British officers and between 40 and 50 percent of other ranks
Russian 7 killed and 30 wounded.¹⁴⁷

Both the official account of the Ashkhabad Committee and Moberly give a figure of 1,000 for Bolshevik casualties.¹⁴⁸

Following this defeat the Bolshevik forces withdrew three days later. Following up, the Transcaspian force occupied Tejend on 20 October, to be joined by the British detachment.

In fairness to Malleson it should be pointed out that, whether or not strategically and politically he was right to advance, it did take courage to order the attack, given

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the small number of troops at his command and the far distance of any possible reinforcements. And his courage was rewarded with victory.

Still pursuing a different line, however, the government of India on 23 October cabled London making it clear that without express orders, they proposed that British troops should on no account be engaged in enterprises east of Kaahka.¹⁴⁹ Too late. The ball was already in motion and on 1 November the Transcaspian force occupied Merv.

The Tashkent Perspective

Even if only briefly, it is perhaps worthwhile to remind oneself of the perspective of the Tashkent Soviet. The pressures described in the section earlier on Russian Turkestan had not gone away; if anything, they had intensified during this period.

These were observed by the members of the Kashgar Mission. As Macartney commented, "Turkistan was then an island, so isolated it was – difficult to get into and equally difficult to get out of" and Bailey pointed out: "They were fighting on four "fronts", besides having to face danger, which in January 1919 culminated in an armed conflict, on the Home Front, in Tashkent itself".

In August/September 1918 the armed forces consisted of 16,000 men with 9,000 on the Ashkhabad Front, 3,000 on the Orenburg Front, 3,000 in Tashkent both to keep control there and resist any Basmachi threat from the Ferghana valley and 1,000 in Semirechie.¹⁵⁰ Their equipment was poor. As we have seen, a large proportion were prisoners of war.

As is clear from the troop dispositions, the Tashkent government regarded the Ashkhabad front as the most vital. As Becker points out,¹⁵¹ the Transcaspian forces were closest to Tashkent; they alone would have to be defeated by Tashkent unaided by any Soviet army in their rear, and they alone had assistance from the Allies. At the same time the Emirate of Bokhara lay right across Tashkent's lines of communication, and should the Emir decide to throw in his lot with the Transcaspian government and the British their forces would be cut off and Tashkent itself immediately threatened.

If it is not anticipating too much, it might also be observed that surrounded on all sides by their enemies it was an outstanding achievement for the Tashkent Soviet to survive, mirroring in little the success of the Bolshevik government in Moscow in surmounting extraordinary odds to hold on to power.

The Tashkent Soviet did also find time to develop and pursue a policy designed to undermine British imperialism, particularly, but not exclusively, in India. The Pan-Islamic card was played, and the Indian revolutionary agitators - or perhaps they should be called freedom fighters - Mahendra Pratap and Barkatullah were welcome in Tashkent¹⁵² (Bailey was later, when he was in Bokhara, to meet Mahendra Pratap, who did not realise he was talking to a British secret agent).¹⁵³ Negotiation also took place with the Afghans – Bailey was later to write, "The Afghans are using the Bolsheviks for their own ends as a support against us. The Bolsheviks in the same way are using the Afghans for their own purposes."¹⁵⁴

Warfare by Train

This war mixed the old and the new. Like an echo of forgotten wars the British cavalry actually employed lances in action.¹⁵⁵ On the modern side each force had one aeroplane “at intervals, but they were usually out of order”.¹⁵⁶

But, as elsewhere in Russia during the Civil War,¹⁵⁷ the Transcaspian war was a railway war. As Bailey pointed out, “Russian Turkestan is in one way a curious country. Railways were made before roads – at least before respectable roads ... In fact motor cars could only travel short distances from Tashkent”.¹⁵⁸ And this absence of roads, together with the difficulty of procuring water during marches through the desert made railway war inevitable. (In passing one might remark the irony that the Transcaspian Railway was built by the Tsarist authorities with (*inter alia*) a military role in mind and it was now being used by their Bolshevik successors and opponents appropriately enough for that very purpose.)

Lieut-Colonel Knollys, in command of the 19th Punjabis, described what happened:

“Each side lived entirely by trains. These moved about in long processions, headed or tailed, as the case might be, by their armoured train or trains. On these trains water was carried in huge butts, field-kitchens on open trucks, men, horses, food, guns, and in the case of the Bolsheviks, all their loot, a supply of women for the use of the troops in accordance with Bolshevik principles, and a printing press to produce the pay of the army. There were also hospital trains with a staff of nurses...”¹⁵⁹

Regarding the sleeping arrangements Blacker, in a comment that perhaps reveals more about himself than the subject, wrote, “In fact to say that the males and females therein lived like beasts would be an affront to the beasts”.¹⁶⁰

Captain Uloth of the 28th Light Cavalry mentions a travelling church on one train; he declined to travel in it “while so dirty and armed”.¹⁶¹

The British were allocated two armoured trains (according to Knollys),¹⁶² or three (according to Teague-Jones)¹⁶³. Uloth described the Number One armoured train:

“It consisted of two flat trucks out in front heavily loaded with railway metal so as to set off a mine before the engine reached it; behind this was a flat truck armoured with steel carrying a field gun. There were no tunnels on this railway so height was no consideration. The next vehicle was a passenger coach, on the roof of which had been constructed an armoured bridge containing two machine guns, from which the commander controlled his fire and his engine by signals. Behind this was a powerful, armoured, oil-fired locomotive; an armoured passenger coach came directly behind the engine. This was loop-holed and provided crews quarters and a galley. The last vehicle, excluding two more pilot trucks in the rear, was another flat truck carrying a howitzer.”¹⁶⁴

Protection of the trains was by steel plate or compressed cotton. Teague-Jones relates how, early on in the campaign a Russian railway engineer designed railway armour of sheet iron with cotton in-between. Sceptics suggested that as a test the engineer and Teague-Jones should shut themselves in the truck and be fired upon

by machine gun. Teague-Jones wisely refused and watched as the bullets went straight through the truck. The cotton lining had only been pressed by hand, not machine.¹⁶⁵

The whole operation hinged on the armoured trains. According to Blacker, “Neither in build nor in their tactical employment did these resemble the armoured trains of 1900 or 1901 in South Africa, nor yet the heavy guns on railway mountings of the Western Front. They were a sort of cross between the two.”¹⁶⁶

With two trains with guns of unequal range, the weaker must inevitably be driven back. So, to hold its position, a hiding place had to be found, which only occurred when the line curved around a hill. The landscape crossed by the Transcaspian Railway is not hilly, and advances or retreats to the next position had to be of some distance, dictated solely by the need to find shelter for the armoured train. Knollys again:

“The procedure then was for the train to lie behind the hill with an observation post on it, or to one side, and fire over it. Further, an engine must breathe – so it did this after the manner of a whale, letting off great puffs of steam at intervals, then retiring or advancing, so as to be out of harm’s way while the enemy had shots at the smoke. Should the opposing train be brave enough to poke its nose round the corner it would immediately be within close range and at a great disadvantage, as the other would be sitting ready for it.”¹⁶⁷

The Bolshevik armoured trains - according to Teague-Jones there were three of them¹⁶⁸ - had guns of longer range.¹⁶⁹ They were, on the other hand, at a disadvantage over fuel. This was a problem for both sides, but the Allied side did have access to some oil via Krasnovodsk. Saxaul (a scrubby plant of the steppes) was the standby for the Bolshevik forces, although Bailey records that further north, on the Aktobinsk Front the engines were adapted to burn fish which were caught in the Aral Sea and dried for this purpose.¹⁷⁰

Both sides indulged in the blowing up of lines and the destruction of small bridges, but equally, both sides had skilled railwaymen and repairs were rapid. A method employed on one occasion was the slight and gradual widening of the distance between the rails just sufficient to drop the engine between the sleepers. Blacker records that the Transcaspian forces were the ones to do this;¹⁷¹ evening up the record, Knollys¹⁷² and Uloth¹⁷³ agree that it was the Bolsheviks.

Railwaymen

The role of the railway workers throughout this period, both politically and in practical terms of keeping the railways running, was vital. In Turkestan as a whole the proletariat was in any case small and consisted to a large degree of railwaymen. The pattern was set with the seizure of power in Tashkent on 13 November 1917 by the Tashkent Soviet; it drew its support from the local railway workshops and the soldiers of the Tashkent garrison. Again, Ossipov’s revolt in Tashkent in January 1919 was supported by the railway workers.¹⁷⁴

Moving more specifically to Transcaspia, the revolt of 14 July 1918 in Ashkhabad was led by railway workers;¹⁷⁵ Malleon cabled on 17 July, somewhat ungraciously, that the Bolsheviks had been defeated and driven eastward from

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Ashkhabad by the Mensheviks, "... who were mainly anti-Bolshevik railway employees, were ill-organised, ignorant and unlikely to oppose actively the German plans". Again on 17 August the C in C India cabled the War Office, on information received from Malleson, "The President of the Transcaspian Government is by profession an engine driver and its representative with Malleson is a ticket collector".¹⁷⁶ (Knollys, contrarily, says that in fact the President was a butcher.)¹⁷⁷

The railwaymen remained a potent political force throughout the British intervention. One of Teague-Jones' duties as Political Officer in Ashkhabad was to conciliate them when they pressed, as they did repeatedly, for their salaries to be paid, with the threat of strike always present.¹⁷⁸ And as we shall see their cooperation was essential when the British decided to withdraw.

In Krasnovodsk, the President, Vassili Kuhn, had been an engineer in the railway¹⁷⁹ (though Ullman describes him as a Caucasian Cossack officer).¹⁸⁰ At the opposite end of the political spectrum, Kolesov, President of the Tashkent Soviet, was a railway worker.¹⁸¹

Bailey

Having left Bailey dangling, as it were, it is only humane now to round off his story. He remained in hiding in and around Tashkent until 15 October 1919,¹⁸² when, in an extraordinary coup, he left for Bokhara as a member of the Bolshevik Counter Intelligence Service. Leaving Bokhara on 17 December he reached Meshed on 14 January 1920.¹⁸³ Peter Hopkirk records that Bailey "has always been denounced by Soviet historians as a British master spy sent, under cover of a bogus diplomatic mission, to try to topple Bolshevik rule in Central Asia".¹⁸⁴ A spy, certainly, very brave and inventive certainly, but at the same time it is doubtful whether his long sojourn behind enemy lines achieved much. He was not involved in the Ossipov revolt (though Soviet historians have tried to claim otherwise), his contact with White Russians in Tashkent came to nothing, and he had no influence on events in Bokhara.¹⁸⁵ He also had the greatest difficulty in communicating the information he was gathering. For example, writing about the early spring period 1919 he says:

"This kind of thing made it impossible for me to travel about and to get out of the country or even send messages. I have explained how Lukashov had been shot. Another messenger got as far as Samarkand and then came back with my messages. Other failed to deliver my messages for one reason or another."¹⁸⁶

And what little and late did manage to get through was not necessarily appreciated. Malleson writes on 16 November 1919:

"Bailey. I have received lengthy (?formal) communication from Bailey, who arrived in Bokhara on October 19th ... A good deal Bailey reports is old news which we have already had either from my agent or from Bolshevik wireless. In some particulars he is quite wrong."¹⁸⁷

British Policy Discussions November 1918–January 1919

Ironically enough, just as the Transcaspian forces were rolling into Merv (1 November), the Turks were signing an armistice with the Allied forces (31 October), and 11 November saw the armistice with the Germans and Austrians.

But, contrarily, with the advance to Merv Malleson's ideas grew bigger. A cable of his of 31 October said that if the Orenburg door was kept closed the small British force "... would suffice to clear up Turkestan, which would very greatly enhance British prestige in Central Asia".¹⁸⁸ The wave-length was wrong. The India Office cabled on 3 November that although there was no objection to supporting anti-Bolshevik movements, great caution should be exercised, and the government of India cabled on 4 November to Malleson that British troops were not to be employed eastward of Tejend (where of course they already were). Malleson defended the advance to Merv as being essential and did not hesitate to push for a further advance to Charjui on the Amu Darya (he was under heavy pressure from the Ashkhabad Committee to do just this).

What Malleson failed to take sufficiently into account was the simple fact that the principal reason for British involvement was gone. The First World War was over. There was no longer a Turko-German threat. Of course this left a dilemma for the British, and a question of obligation. Teague-Jones put it as follows:

"We British had thrust our way up into Central Asia because our vital strategic interest demanded it. The Transcaspian situation played into our hands and the Transcaspian anti-Bolsheviks were in a position, at a very critical moment of the war, to accord us valuable co-operation ... it was certainly not their fault that circumstances far remote from Transcaspia subsequently rendered their co-operation of less and less consequence to us, until, with the signing of the Armistice in November, our own troubles and interests in Transcaspia were to vanish."¹⁸⁹

On the other hand (as the government of India pointed out) only the presence of British troops had saved the Ashkhabad government from annihilation in the first place.¹⁹⁰

Malleson gave overmuch weight to the need to fight Bolshevism, at a time when British government policy was variable. He also failed to appreciate fully that the longer the British stayed the greater the commitment and the greater the difficulty of withdrawal. The problem has no doubt faced governments and commanders since the beginning of history; in the twentieth century perhaps Vietnam provides perhaps the clearest example of this dilemma.

There was a further exchange of telegrams between London, India and Meshed from 6-12 November where Malleson put forcefully his view for strong support for the Ashkhabad Committee and for maintaining British troops at Merv. The government of India in particular was not convinced. As the Chief of Staff in India telegraphed on 12 November: "His presentation of the situation from the Transcaspian point of view was not accepted as quite correct, and the Government of India did not regard the support sanctioned by H.M Government in August as applicable to the extensive operations undertaken."¹⁹¹ In the same telegram there is agreement to Malleson's suggestion that, while awaiting instructions from London, he might proceed to Ashkhabad and need take no steps to withdraw troops from Merv.

British Military Involvement in Transcaspia (1918-1919)

There was another problem – money. It was not a new problem, simply one that had become more acute. The Ashkhabad Committee, desperately short of money, were pressing Teague-Jones daily for financial support,¹⁹² understandably in the light of the commitment made in the Protocol signed in August. Teague-Jones, feeling that there was a moral obligation, was strongly critical not only that money had not been paid, but that the issue had just been left in suspense. On 11 November he wired to Meshed:

“At present Government lack the means of continuing the payment of salaries of officials and railway employees. Failure to do this will lead to wholesale disorder and the collapse of the Government, accompanied almost inevitably with an attempt to reinstate the Bolsheviks. Discontent is increasing daily owing to cold weather and almost complete lack of fuel, coupled with the rising price of bread due to the large number of refugees, running into thousands.”¹⁹³

This message was passed on by Malleson to Delhi and London.

According to Moberly, Malleson reached Ashkhabad before 17 November.¹⁹⁴ Teague-Jones puts the date as 24 November.¹⁹⁵ Malleson returned to Meshed on 15 December according to Moberly¹⁹⁶ and on 19 December according to Ellis,¹⁹⁷ who was one of his party. During his stay in Ashkhabad and carrying on to early January, the major engagements were paper ones as Malleson, the government of India, the India Office, the War Office and the Eastern Committee exchanged telegrams and minutes about the aims of the Mission and its future. Through this period Malleson continued to preach a forward policy. As late as 31 December he was still proposing an advance to the Oxus. He would then disarm most of the Russian and Armenian soldiers, and with the cessation of the heavy military cost of the Russian and Armenian soldiery he saw no reason why Transcaspia should not be able to pay its way (not, in fact, a very plausible scenario).¹⁹⁸ His main opponent was the government of India, which consistently remained much more cautious. Where Malleson had a valid point was that he found it hard to get clear and unequivocal guidance on the way forward. There was uncertainty within the various elements of the British government as to what to do.

On 12 December 1918 we have a redefinition of the object of the retention of the Malleson Mission by the Secretary of State for India, quoted in a “Note on the Malleson Mission” prepared by Lieut-General Cox of the Military Department of the India Office on 20 December.¹⁹⁹ The redefinition is as follows:

1. To prevent Bolshevism from over-running Transcaspia from the north, and so being able to overturn the Askhabad government and penetrate Khorasan;
2. To retain hold on the railway from the Caspian until it is evident that the presence of our troops in that region is no longer necessary;
3. The early evacuation of the Austro-Hungarian prisoners of war, who form the mainstay of the enemy’s resistance, as soon as arrangements can be made for this *via* Baku-Batum.

General Cox’s note strongly puts the case for retaining the Malleson Mission, but ends with a truly Yes Minister comment, which can stand as a sample of some of the poor quality thinking that helped confuse an already confusing issue:

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“It is submitted, therefore, that the present is not a suitable time to withdraw Malleon, and that the Government of India should be told that His Majesty’s Government have under consideration the desirability of retaining him where he is for the present, but without granting further financial assistance to the Askabad Government, at all events until they have more proofs than they have at present of their stability, and that they be asked to give Malleon’s views and their own remarks on the proposal.”

Given that Malleon had made it crystal-clear that the Ashkhabad government was absolutely desperately in need of funds, and given that the likelihood of the Ashkhabad government soon becoming more coherent and stable was extremely low, and known to be so, General Cox’s comments can be said to have helpfully taken the debate back several stages.

The Secretary of State for India showed more clarity of mind when minuting on 20 December a covering note to Cox’s effort:

“I circulate to the Eastern Committee a note on the Malleon Mission prepared in this Office.

I confess to feeling grave uneasiness about the matter. It does not seem to me that it is likely from Treasury accounts of the situation that we shall at any time be able to give more money to Transcaspia. I am appalled already at the extent of our commitments in Persia and I do not want either to increase them or to be crippled in discharging them by expenditure across the Caspian. Nor do I think this country is prepared to continue fighting unknown enemies when the enemies against which they were prepared to fight have collapsed.

It may be true that there are reasons, as is so forcibly argued by my Military Secretary, for keeping Malleon and his men there for the present, but I think the Eastern Committee should watch the situation with a view to withdrawing him at the earliest possible minute.”²⁰⁰

An extraordinary point about those that maintained a forward, or at least a holding policy is that in common sense it demanded a reasonable local partner, yet it was Malleon himself who cabled on 30 December 1918 that the Transcaspian government were without power, prestige, money or credit.²⁰¹

Finally the India Office telegraphed on 8 January that the British government wished to withdraw the Malleon Mission, and were not prepared to provide indefinite financial assistance to the local government. However, as there were military reason for retention they were sending General Milne, who on 15 January 1919 took over control of all the British forces in Trans-Caucasia (this included all British troops in Transcaspia),²⁰² to make a full report before action was taken.²⁰³

While this policy debate was raging there were financial, political and military developments in Transcaspia, which we must now address.

Finance November 1918–January 1919

Though there is considerable detail regarding financial negotiations in, for example Teague-Jones, Ellis and Moberly, it is not so easy to be clear about the amounts that were actually paid by the British to the Ashkhabad Committee. However, on 13 March 1919 the Indian government cabled details of General Malleson's expenditure to date²⁰⁴ and the following figures are listed which apply to December 1918 (the full list is given in Appendix 2):

“Payment to Askabad Government for rations supplied	£100,000
Subsidy in December	£100,000
Payment to Askabad Government in December	£ 17,000” ²⁰⁵

The situation was therefore that the British side had undertaken in the Protocol signed in August to provide financial support to the Ashkhabad Committee. For four months they had not done so, while the Committee lived off the windfall of 70,000,000 roubles (the rate of exchange then was approximately 50 roubles to the pound) found in the Treasury when they took over from the Soviets.²⁰⁶ During this period the British had also run up bills with the Committee because they had not paid for the supplies that had been provided to them.

The Committee was right to feel aggrieved. They received late, only when serious disaster faced them and only when General Malleson had stirred himself from Meshed, the barest minimum they could reasonably expect. And no further payments were made except as preparation for and the actual carrying out of withdrawal. Such a low level of financial support meant also that through until the departure of the Malleson Mission the Transcaspian government teetered on the brink of bankruptcy and collapse.

Further, given that General Malleson had made the financial commitment in August 1918 it was no credit at all to him or to the government departments concerned that no credible plan was made over the next four months as to what sums should be handed over, when and from what source. We actually have the government of India on 26th November saying that the sudden urgent demand for money for the Transcaspian government had taken them by surprise²⁰⁷ and General Malleson on 2nd December expressing “his inability to suggest what amount beyond the five million roubles for rations should be given the Transcaspian government, owing to the important questions of higher policy involved”.²⁰⁸ The issue of who should pay for the cost of the Malleson Mission rumbled on to 1921.

Political Developments November 1918–January 1919

Politically this period saw the Mission intervening ever more actively in the internal politics of Transcaspia as the Ashkhabad Committee's rule fragmented and finally collapsed. Political intrigue was rampant. The Ashkhabad Committee was weak and divided; there was severe tension between the Ashkhabad Committee and the Turkmens, leading to a virtual rupture; the railwaymen were agitating for, amongst other things, higher pay; and Bolshevik propaganda and agents effectively stirred the pot.

British involvement in internal politics was not, of course, something new, but it is interesting to see this involvement of the British increasing as they tried to prop up

a failing regime. A significant step was taken when the Ashkhabad Committee effectively confessed that they were unable to guarantee control of their own capital and requested Malleson's help. Two companies of the Warwicks were sent from Krasnovodsk, arriving on 3rd and 4th December, whilst a squadron 28th Light Cavalry arrived on 8 December.²⁰⁹ Incidentally this action puts a rather large question mark over Ellis' comment that "Malleson was compelled to resist firmly but tactfully all attempts by the Transcaspians to make Malmiss responsible for domestic problems, or for internal security measures".²¹⁰

A crisis arose 31 December when there was a meeting in Ashkhabad of about 1,000 railway and other workers, the tone of the meeting being actively Bolshevik and very strongly anti-British.²¹¹ In conjunction with Drushkin, the Chief of Police, Teague-Jones took steps, which included ordering of patrols by the 28th Cavalry, and the setting up of machine guns, to take control of the situation – which was done successfully. Drushkin made a number of arrests, and Teague-Jones asked what would be done with them. "“That,” said Drushkin grimly, as he emptied his glass of tea, “is a domestic matter which does not concern the British authorities.””²¹²

At the same time Colonel Fleming at Krasnovodsk was dealing with a similar threat to the government there.

On 1 January 1919 the Ashkhabad Committee, unable to carry on, resigned, and a Committee of Public Safety came into being, which was, for all practical purposes a dictatorship.²¹³ The key figure in deciding on its composition was Teague-Jones,²¹⁴ who insisted that two of the five members should be Turkmen. In the weeks that followed the forceful and somewhat sinister Drushkin – who worked closely with Teague-Jones – was extremely active in discovering plots and arresting those suspected of Bolshevik agitation. One of the first to be arrested was Funtikov, formerly the President of the Ashkhabad Committee;²¹⁵ other members of the Committee followed him.²¹⁶ The new Committee soon became linked with the White counter-revolutionary front.²¹⁷

It would probably be going too far to say that by now the regime was a puppet of the British, but assuredly things had moved a long way from the days when the newly formed Ashkhabad Committee had negotiated on a relatively equal basis with Malleson. And it was Teague-Jones' close association with the Ashkhabad Committee and its successor that gave a handle to Soviet historians to identify him with all the Committee's acts.

Military Action November 1918–January 1919

Meanwhile, things had been quiet on the military front since the occupation of Merv on 1 November 1918. The Bolshevik forces had withdrawn to Ravnina, 65 miles northeast of Merv, while the Transcaspians were distributed mainly between Merv and Bairam Ali (on the edge of the Merv oasis), with an advanced post about 19 miles from Ravnina.²¹⁸

We have already glanced at warfare by railway. Lieut-Colonel Knollys described the period – the lull – which lasted till 16 January:

“Both sides were back at the old game of living in the trains, which stood in a long line on the single railway. Every third day or so the armoured train required refilling, and since this involved the whole row moving

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behind the station, the night would be spent in shunting trains backwards and forwards. On these nights the army virtually ceased to exist, as it would not be separated from its trains.”²¹⁹

On 8 November 1918 General Beatty had arrived in Meshed to take over the executive command of all the troops at Meshed and beyond.²²⁰ During this period supplies ceased to come up through Persia; they came instead – including vastly superior rum – across the Caucasus (the British having occupied Baku, in spite of Russian protests, on 17 November)²²¹ and the Caspian Sea.²²² A list of the distribution of British troops in Transcaspia and Meshed at the end of December is at Appendix 3.

On 16 January 1919 the relative peace at the front was broken with an attack on Annenkovo launched by the Bolshevik forces, which were estimated by Knollys as 11,000 and by Moberly as closer to 5,000.²²³ The attack came in thick fog, which both hampered the attackers and led to a confused action. Reinforcements had to be hurriedly brought up by train from Bairam Ali. Thanks once again to the courage of the Punjabi troops (aided for the second time by a gallant attack by the Russian crew of the armoured train) the attack was defeated. Casualties amongst the Punjabis were 46, among the Transcaspian force 70, while Bolshevik casualties, including those from frostbite, could have been as high as 1,100.²²⁴ As Moberly records, “This affair enhanced greatly the already high reputation locally of the Indian troops.”²²⁵

At this time the total strength of the British force (or perhaps it should be described as an Indian force with added Brits) in Transcaspia was well under 1,000.²²⁶

General Milne’s Report 1 February 1919

General Milne arrived at Ashkhabad on 21 January 1919, meeting General Malleon there and visiting the front.²²⁷ His report was cabled to the War Office on 1 February.²²⁸ His view of the military situation was that it would be ludicrous if it were not so unsound. Particularly in the light of the recent capture of Orenburg (on 22 December) which would allow Bolshevik reinforcements, to secure the position would require a force including a cavalry regiment, four infantry battalions and heavy artillery; financial support for the local government would also be required. He concluded that the existing conditions could not continue and that half-measures were useless. “We should either assume the burden of complete control and of support, involving time, money and labour in an almost hopeless task, or we should leave the country to its fate with the accompanying anarchy and bloodshed.”

With this report the debate collapsed. The British government, with the India government concurring, decided that enough was enough and on 15 February orders were issued to General Milne for the withdrawal of General Malleon’s force – Krasnovodsk only to be retained.²²⁹

The Withdrawal February–April 1919

On receipt of his orders Malleon correctly protested that evacuation could not be carried out in haste. He secured the support of Milne, and was given to the end of March.²³⁰

General Malleon, in a lecture to the Central Asian Society on 24 January 1924²³¹ regarding his Mission spent a relatively long proportion of his time talking about the withdrawal, and understandably so, because withdrawal in good order would not be easy. Extraction is often more difficult than insertion. In this case there was the double goal of ensuring the safe exit of the British forces and of trying to give the best chance to the Committee of Public Safety of finding alternative support and surviving the transition period. The former was carried out completely successfully and the latter, under the circumstances, as well as might be expected.

Earlier on – just before the fighting at Annenkova - a small group of “swaggering and blustering Dagastani Cossacks” had joined the Transcaspian force.²³² Towards the end of February small bodies of troops came from the Caucasus, from Denikin’s army, and by 6 March 900 such reinforcements had passed through Ashkhabad, as effectively the Committee of Public Safety became part of the White army organization in the Caucasus. One of Denikin’s senior officers, General Lazarev, was sent to Ashkhabad; in due course, in April, he was to take over command from Oraz Sirdar.²³³ Thus an alternative sponsor had arrived – even though of somewhat dubious value.

Ironically enough it was during this late period that the Malleon Mission provided support for the Emir of Bukhara. A number of rifles and ammunition were sent off in February 1919 by caravan under the control of two Indian NCOs.²³⁴ These two NCOs under extremely difficult circumstances brought the 100 camel caravan to Bukhara, where they met Bailey, and in due course escaped with him, reaching Meshed in safety on 14 January 1920.²³⁵ It is a measure both of the fear that Tashkent had of intervention by the Emir of Bukhara, and of their over-estimation of British influence and interference that the caravan subsequently multiplied in the Tashkent rumour mill to a constant stream of arms, while the two NCOs became large numbers of British military instructors.

A difficult question was how and when to break the news of the withdrawal to the Committee of Public Safety. General Malleon reported on 1 March that he had done so confidentially.²³⁶ As might be anticipated, the announcement caused consternation; three ministers resigned.²³⁷ Ellis reports that despite this the attitude of the Committee remained friendly and courteous, even though some members felt let down, and said so.²³⁸ As soon as the news became more public many people either left Transcaspia, or made preparations to do so. Morale sank.

One of the main problems was clearly how to ensure the safe withdrawal of British troops without provoking a Bolshevik attack. This was dealt with by spreading the rumour that the departure from Merv was to be in fact only a cover for flanking attacks to be launched on the Bolshevik position.²³⁹ The rumour was effective; the Bolsheviks removed units from Annenkovo to cover these imaginary attacks, and the British withdrawal took place in peace.

Another problem was how to ensure that the railways would run, because otherwise withdrawal would have been either impossible or exceedingly difficult. The solution was money. As detailed in the India Office paper quoted earlier²⁴⁰ £80,000 was expended on “Maintenance of railway service” and £100,000 on “Expenses of withdrawal” (see Appendix 2). How much of the £80,000 was spent at this time is not indicated. However it is on record that with the decision to withdraw came a (wise) decision of the British government – the government of India concurring - “to pay the Transcaspian railway workers their arrears of pay and wages till the withdrawal was complete”.²⁴¹ Ellis puts it slightly more cynically, explaining that

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the leaders of the Railwaymen's Union "were paid a sum of money to salve their conscience and the trains were provided".²⁴²

The process of withdrawal of the British force, which numbered some 950,²⁴³ began early in March; the last remaining British troops left in the early hours of 14 April 1919.

Following the Withdrawal

With the departure of the British it did not take the Bolsheviks long to take the offensive.²⁴⁴ They attacked in May 1919, Merv being occupied. The Transcaspians retired to Ashkhabad, which, in turn was evacuated by the government and the army on 15 July 1919. A new front was maintained for a time near Kizyl Arvat, but yet again a withdrawal was necessary, this time to Krasnovodsk. The British naval detachment there having already left, Krasnovodsk was occupied by the Bolshevik forces in 1920, thus completing the re-conquest of Transcaspia.

Ironically enough, when the dangers to British possession of India had faded with the ending of the First World War, one of the recurrent nightmares of British military strategists took place – Afghanistan launched an attack on British India. The Emir, Habibullah, who had been effectively a British friend by remaining neutral throughout the First World War, was assassinated in February 1919²⁴⁵ and he was succeeded by Amanullah who immediately announced his pan-Islamic sympathies, while simultaneously having cordial relations with the Bolshevik leaders.²⁴⁶ Announcing a holy war, he launched his attack in May, hoping for concurrent uprisings in India. But the time had passed and after a couple of months fighting he was forced to ask for an armistice.

Malleson himself remained in charge of the Mission, based in Meshed, until May 1920, conducting "deception" operations against both Afghans and Bolsheviks.²⁴⁷ Blacker – earlier he had been one of the members of the Kashgar Mission – served from April 1919 on the northern Persian frontier as part of the cordon against Bolshevik pressure. He records how, soon after the capture of Ashkhabad (renamed Poltaratsk) propagandists and agents were sent across the frontier; they were usually caught.²⁴⁸ Then arms were supplied to a minor Kurdish chief, Khuda Verdi Sardar, to rebel. The affair came to nothing, but "the massing of several thousand Bolshevik troops" at the same time 30 miles from the border made matters more tense. According to Blacker the legend inscribed over the door of the Bolshevik First Army headquarters in Ashkhabad ran, "Our mission is to set the East in flames".²⁴⁹

It is a small point amongst the major matters that were then taking place, but it is perhaps worth recording how unappreciated the members (or at least some of them) of the Malleson Mission felt. Toward the beginning of his lecture at the Central Asian Society in 1924²⁵⁰ Malleson records that he got to Meshed in July 1918 in record time and received a special telegram of congratulation from the Commander-in-Chief in India "which I particularly desire to mention here, inasmuch as it was the only word of commendation that the Mission received from anyone in authority during the whole of the two years I was with it". Ellis noted that no visit was ever made to Meshed or the front by any representative of the Political Department or army headquarters in India, and complained of the lack of guidance.²⁵¹ But, to even things up, Teague-Jones complains about Malleson. He relates how when he was leaving Transcaspia he received thanks and appreciation from the Ashkhabad

government and from British officers. “Only from General Malleson I had not a single word of appreciation.”²⁵² For an assessment of General Malleson see Appendix 4.

Teague-Jones, above all of the British participants, was not to forget the Transcaspian episode. Denounced by Trotsky in 1922 for the part he had allegedly played in the killing of the 26 commissars, he changed his name and effectively disappeared. Only after his death in 1988 was the secret of his identity revealed.²⁵³

A final, somewhat amusing footnote to British involvement in Transcaspia is provided by the squabble between government departments that went on from 1918 to 1921 as to who should pay for the Malleson Mission and the cordon in East Persia. The India Office has a secret file “Expenditure on Malleson Mission and Troops in East Persia”; this comprises a collection of documents which it is careful to point out is printed from India Office files only.²⁵⁴ At issue was both the actual amount spent (and being spent) and which of the great departments of state – the India Office, the Foreign Office and the War Office should foot the bill. The Chancellor of the Exchequer tried to act as the combined referee and neutral judge, and as the climax of a 5 page review of past history dated 11 November 1919 put forward a compromise that was generally acceptable, with some quibbling, as regards the period the Malleson Mission was in Transcaspia. But with players of the calibre of Lord Curzon at the Foreign Office and Winston Churchill as the Secretary of State for War he was never going to find it easy to wield either the yellow or the red card and the debate regarding the funding of the Malleson Mission post-Transcaspia grumbled on.²⁵⁵

The file, sadly, does not record the winner, but the summary prepared by the Chancellor of the Exchequer on 11 November is valuable, not just as a historical summary but because it encapsulates the trouble the British government had in agreeing the exact reason(s) why it sent a military force to Transcaspia; at the same time it also vividly charts the disagreements between the various parts of the British political and military establishment in London, in India, in Meshed and in Transcaspia.

Afterword

What were the results of the sending British troops into Transcaspia?

The most obvious direct result was that the life of the Transcaspian government was prolonged by a year. There can be little doubt that the ramshackled nature of the defence that the Ashkhabad government could put up in July 1918 would, without British assistance, have crumbled quickly in the face of continuing Bolshevik attacks. At the same time British intervention frightened the life out of the Tashkent Soviet, and drew not just their attention, as we have seen, but more than half their troops. Inevitably therefore, British intervention was of help to the various other movements facing the Tashkent Soviet – such as the Basmachi, the Khiva regime and the combined Arash Orda and White forces in Kazakhstan. In particular the Bukharan Emirate gained a longer breathing space before its absorption into the Soviet Union.

Whether these results are positive or not is debatable. On the one hand the imposition of a Soviet regime, with all that that entailed, was put off for a while. Holding back the Bolshevik advance had been one of the British war aims (although

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pressed intermittently, as we have seen) and Moberly claimed as one of the important results of British intervention the “saving the country for many months from the horrors of Bolshevism”.²⁵⁶ On the other hand fighting and turmoil were prolonged and regimes that on the whole did not have much to commend them lasted a while longer.

At a different level, the intervention helped to poison the atmosphere between Britain and the Soviet Union. The difference in ideologies was so profound that bosom friendship was not in any case on the agenda, and military involvement in Transcaspia was only one of several interventions that Britain made in the Russian Civil War, but it added its mite to the ill-will. It was not just the fighting, but the activities of British spies²⁵⁷ and, particularly, the alleged British role in the death of the 26 commissars that upset the Soviet side.

Whether the intervention made any difference in terms of the First World War and the threat to India is more difficult to determine, even with the glorious benefit of hindsight. However, the answer in the end has to be “no”. British troops moved into Transcaspia in July 1918 and by November 1918 the war was over. There was too little time for events in Transcaspia to have an appreciable effect one way or the other.

Whether it was a mistake for Britain to send in troops at all is another issue, and one not easy of resolution. While there was a genuine basis of concern for the British – one has only to think of the German and Turkish advance through the Caucasus – it must remain, as it was at the time, highly debatable whether the perceived threats were close enough to actuality and immediate enough to warrant the serious step of invasion of another country.

ENDNOTES

¹ Bailey, F M, *Mission to Tashkent* Oxford: OUP, 2002, p26.

² India Officer Library, IOR/L/MIL/5/807, Note from Secretary of State for India dated 20 December 1918 attaching a Note on the Malleon Mission.

³ Sir Crispin Tickell, interview, Saga magazine, March 2004, p18.

⁴ The map is copied from *Operations in Persia 1914-1919. Compiled, by arrangement with the Government of India, under the direction of the Historical Section of the Committee of Imperial Defence by Brig.-Gen.F.J. Moberly, C.B., C.S.I. D.S.O. ,p.s.c.*

Part of the *History of the Great War based on Official Documents*, it was printed by HMSO in November 1929 in a limited edition of 500 copies. Classified as “Confidential” in Britain, it was classified as “Secret” in India. It was reprinted by HMSO under the auspices of the Imperial War Museum in 1987 and references are to this edition. It is referred to in this essay as “Moberly”.

⁵ Ellis, C H, *The Transcaspian Episode 1918-1919*, London: Hutchinson, 1963.

⁶ Uloth, G, *Riding to War*, Stockbridge: Monks, 1993.

⁷ Teague-Jones, R, *The Spy who Disappeared*, London: Gollancz, 1990.

⁸ The term Russian Turkestan is used in this essay as it was used by the British sources at the time. It is taken to mean the guberniia of Turkestan and the Steppe guberniia, though it is to be doubted whether those writing at the time always meant to encompass the whole of the northern stretch of the Steppe guberniia. Put another way, it is roughly the area that now comprises the countries of Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. For simplicity’s sake the term Turkestan, rather than Russian Turkestan will be used in this essay.

⁹ Etherton, P T, *In The Heart of Asia*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1926 p154.

¹⁰ Becker, S, *Russia’s Protectorates in Central Asia: Bukhara and Khiva, 1854-1924*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1968 p284.

¹¹ Becker, *op cit*, p274.

- 12 Park, A G, *Bolshevism in Turkestan 1917-1927*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1957, p34.
- 13 The term Austrian is used to keep matters simple. The proper term should be Austro-Hungarian, and the prisoners included soldiers from the various nationalities that made up the Austro-Hungarian Empire.
- 14 Krist, G, *Prisoner in the Forbidden Land*, London; Faber & Faber, 1938, p14.
- 15 Brun, A H, *Troublous Times*, London: Constable, 1931, pp48, 76.
- 16 Brun, *op cit*, p129.
- 17 Bailey, *op cit*, p42.
- 18 India Office Library, IOR/L/MIL/17/14/87.
- 19 Brun, *op cit*, p78.
- 20 Macartney, G, "Bolshevism as I saw it at Tashkent in 1918", *The Journal of the Central Asian Society*, June 1920, p49.
- 21 Macartney, *op cit*. p53; Bailey, *op cit*, p52.
- 22 Bailey, *op cit*, p148.
- 23 Greaves, R, "Iranian Relations with Great Britain and British India, 1798-1921" *The Cambridge History of Iran 7*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p423.
- 24 Keddie, N, "Iran under the Later Qajars, 1848-1922", *The Cambridge History of Iran 7*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p205.
- 25 Greaves, *op cit*, p422.
- 26 India Office Library, IOR/L/PS/11/138.
- 27 Moberly, *op cit*. On p474 he details the force as follows:
28th Light Cavalry
One section, 25th Mountain Battery
Nine rifles, Sappers and Miners
19th Punjabis
One hundred and fifty rifles, 106th Hazara Pioneers
Two pack wireless stations
There were also about 1,100 locally-raised levies.
- 28 This paragraph is based on Ullman, R H, *Intervention and the War*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961, p305 ff.
- 29 India Office Library, IOR/L/MIL/5/807.
- 30 India Office Library, IOR/L/MIL/5/807.
- 31 See endnote 4 above.
- 32 Moberly, *op cit*, p267.
- 33 India Office Library, IOR/L/MIL/5/807.
- 34 India Office Library, IOR/L/MIL/5/807.
- 35 Moberly, *op cit*, p277.
- 36 India Office Library, IOR/L/MIL/5/807.
- 37 India Office Library, IOR/L/MIL/5/807.
- 38 Ullman, R H, *Intervention and the War*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961, pviii.
- 39 India Office Library, IOR/L/MIL/5/807.
- 40 India Office Library, IOR/L/MIL/5/807; Moberly, *op cit*, p294.
- 41 India Office Library, IOR/L/MIL/5/807.
- 42 India Office Library, IOR/L/MIL/5/807; Moberly, *op cit*, p295.
- 43 Ullman, *op cit*, p311.
- 44 This paragraph is based on Ullman, *op cit*, p306.
- 45 Moberly, *op cit*, p332.
- 46 Moberly, *op cit*, p335.
- 47 Moberly, *op cit*, p335.
- 48 Moberly, *op cit*, p334; Ullman, *op cit*, p313.
- 49 Ullman, *op cit*, p314.
- 50 Bailey, *op cit*, p42.
- 51 Moberly, *op cit*, p334.
- 52 Teague-Jones, *op cit*, p35.
- 53 Teague-Jones, *op cit*, p79.
- 54 Moberly, *op cit*, p335.
- 55 Moberly, *op cit*, p347.

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- 56 India Office Library, IOR/ L/PS/11/137, Telegram 54712 MO3, of 13 July from CGS Simla to DMI quoting Redl telegram under number M D 167 of July 10th.
- 57 India Office Library, IOR/L/PS/11/137, Telegram 54778 MO3, of 13 July from C in C India to War Office quoting message from Redl No M D 168 July 9th delayed in transit.
- 58 India Office Library, IOR/L/PS/11/137, Telegram 55116 of July from CGS India to DMI quoting telegram No R.33 dated July 14 from Redl.
- 59 Teague-Jones, *op cit*, p83.
- 60 Ellis, C H, *op cit*, p26. The paragraphs on the Ashkabad revolt in this essay are based on his summary of events.
- 61 Moberly, *op cit*, p348.
- 62 Moberly, *op cit*, p349.
- 63 Swain, G, *Russia's Civil War*, Stroud: Tempus, 2000, p47.
- 64 Malleson, W, "The British Military Mission to Turkestan", *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society*, Vol IX, 1922, p98.
- 65 Moberly, *op cit*, p356.
- 66 Moberly, *op cit*, p348.
- 67 Moberly, *op cit*, p349.
- 68 Teague-Jones, *op cit*, pp58 and 62.
- 69 Ullman, *op cit*, p315.
- 70 India Office Library, IOR/ L/PS/11/138, No 3360, Telegram 60743 MO 1 of August 2nd from C in C India to Malmiss Meshed, repeated War Office.
- 71 India Office Library, IOR/L/PS/11/138, Telegram 61001 MO 1 of 3 August from C in C India to War Office, quoting Malleson telegram timed 8.45 am August 3rd number M D 00146.
- 72 The text of the telegram is "Bolshevik" and not "anti-Bolshevik". This is obviously an error as was noted in the final paragraph of the telegram from the C in C India, which reads "The expression "Espouse Bolshevik cause" appears to be a corruption for "Espouse anti-Bolshevik cause", I have wired to ask."
- 73 India Office Library, IOR/L/PS/11/138.
- 74 Ellis, *op cit*, p30.
- 75 Teague-Jones, *op cit*, pp91-2.
- 76 Moberly, *op cit*, p357.
- 77 Ullman, *op cit*, p316.
- 78 Moberly, *op cit*, p359.
- 79 Moberly, *op cit*, p360.
- 80 Knollys, D E, "Military Operations in Transcaspia, 1918-1919", *Journal of the Central Asian Society*", Vol XIII, April 1926, Part II, p93.
- 81 Ullman, *op cit*, p310.
- 82 Moberly, *op cit*, p358.
- 83 Ellis, *op cit*, p41.
- 84 Ellis, *op cit*, p43.
- 85 Ullman, *op cit*, p317.
- 86 Ullman, *op cit*, p317.
- 87 Teague-Jones, *op cit*, p111.
- 88 Teague-Jones *op cit* p114.
- 89 Ellis, *op cit*, p97.
- 90 Teague-Jones, *op cit*, p115.
- 91 Teague-Jones, *op cit*, p135.
- 92 Becker *op cit*, p275.
- 93 Becker, *op cit*, p275.
- 94 Teague-Jones, *op cit*, p138.
- 95 Teague-Jones, *op cit*, p139.
- 96 Teague-Jones, *op cit*, p138.
- 97 Moberly, *op cit*, p436.
- 98 Ellis, *op cit*, p111.
- 99 Ellis, *op cit*, p111.
- 100 Teague-Jones, *op cit*, p143.
- 101 Teague-Jones, *op cit*, p143.

- 102 Blacker, L V S, "Travels in Turkistan 1918-20", *Geographical Journal*, Vol 58, No 3 (September 1921), p179; Bailey, *op cit*, p15; Etherton, P T, *In The Heart of Asia*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1926, p10.
- 103 Etherton, *op cit*, p95; Bailey, *op cit*, p22.
- 104 Bailey, *op cit*, p26.
- 105 Bailey, *op cit*, p31.
- 106 Macartney, G, "Bolshevism as I saw it at Tashkent in 1918", *The Journal of the Central Asian Society*, June 1920, pp42-59; this reference is to p46.
- 107 Bailey, *op cit*, p26.
- 108 Blacker, L V S, *On Secret Patrol in High Asia*, London: John Murray, 1922, p24.
- 109 Bailey, *op cit*, p39.
- 110 Blacker, *op cit*, p24.
- 111 Macartney, *op cit*, p51.
- 112 Blacker, *op cit*, p32.
- 113 Moberly, *op cit*, p393.
- 114 Macartney, *op cit*, p52.
- 115 India Office Library, IOR/L/MIL/17/14/87.
- 116 India Office Library, IOR/L/MIL/17/14/87, paragraph 16.
- 117 Moberly, *op cit*, p347.
- 118 Moberly, *op cit*, p347.
- 119 Moberly, *op cit*, p348.
- 120 India Office Library, IOR/L/MIL/171/14/87, paragraphs 17 and 18.
- 121 India Office Library, IOR/L/PS/11/137, Telegram 56385 MOI dated July 19th from C in D India to the War Office, quoting telegram dated July 18th under No M D 190 received from Malleson.
- 122 Teague-Jones, *op cit*, p77.
- 123 Teague-Jones, *op cit*, p87.
- 124 Moberly, *op cit*, p356.
- 125 Moberly, *op cit*, p358.
- 126 Moberly, *op cit*, p392.
- 127 Moberly, *op cit*, pp393-4.
- 128 India Office Library, IOR/L/PS/11/138, p3687, Telegram 65148 M O 1 17 August from C in C India to War Office quoting Malleson dated 16th August.
- 129 Knollys, *op cit*, p93.
- 130 Blacker, L V S, *On Secret Patrol in High Asia*, London: John Murray, 1922, p140; Ellis, *op cit*, p156.
- 131 Knollys, *op cit*, p95.
- 132 Moberly, *op cit*, p362.
- 133 Moberly, *op cit*, p452.
- 134 Ellis, *op cit*, p67.
- 135 Moberly, *op cit*, p366.
- 136 Knollys, *op cit*, p100.
- 137 Ellis, *op cit*, p68.
- 138 There is not time to fully explore this issue here. It has been dealt with by Peter Hopkirk in his *On Secret Service East of Constantinople* Oxford: OUP 2001, and in his introduction and epilogue to Teague- Jones' *The Spy who Disappeared*. The only point that seems not to have been picked up is the tone and tenor of Teague-Jones' own account of this period, and, in particular, his references to Drushkin, the Chief of Police. His virtually whole-hearted support for Drushkin, who clearly was a ruthless operator, does allow the suspicion that Teague-Jones might not have objected too strongly at the key meeting to the suggestion of shooting the commissars; he was certainly not the squeamish type.
- 139 Ullman, *op cit*, p324.
- 140 Moberly, *op cit*, p390.
- 141 Moberly, *op cit*, p390.
- 142 Ellis, *op cit*, p68.
- 143 Moberly, *op cit*, p390.
- 144 Knollys, *op cit*, p101.
- 145 Moberly, *op cit*, p391.
- 146 Knollys, *op cit*, p103.

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- 147 Knollys, *op cit*, p394.
 148 Moberly, *op cit*, p395.
 149 Moberly, *op cit*, p398.
 150 Bailey, *op cit*, pp51-52.
 151 Becker, *op cit*, p273.
 152 Ellis, *op cit*, p147.
 153 Bailey, *op cit*, p226 ff.
 154 India Office Library, IOR/L/PS/10/722, p18. From Colonel F M Bailey, C I E on Special Duty with the Kashgar Mission 19 May 1920. See paragraph 4 of Note on the Foreign Relations of the Turkestan Republic.
 155 Uloth, *op cit*, p143; Ellis, *op cit*, p154.
 156 Knollys, *op cit*, p95.
 157 See, for example Denikin, A I, *The White Army*, Cambridge: Ian Faulkner, 1992, pp88-91.
 158 Bailey, *op cit*, p36.
 159 Knollys, *op cit*, p95.
 160 Blacker, L V S, *On Secret Patrol in High Asia*, London: John Murray, 1922, p141.
 161 Ullman, *op cit*, p142.
 162 Knollys, *op cit*, p94.
 163 Teague-Jones, *op cit*, p195.
 164 Uloth, *op cit*, p139.
 165 Teague-Jones, *op cit*, p69.
 166 Blacker *op cit*, p141.
 167 Knollys, *op cit*, p97.
 168 Teague-Jones, *op cit*, p195.
 169 Knollys, *op cit*, p101; Blacker, *op cit*, p142.
 170 Bailey, *op cit*, p52.
 171 Blacker, *op cit*, p143.
 172 Knollys, *op cit*, p96.
 173 Uloth, *op cit*, p139.
 174 Bailey, *op cit*, p119.
 175 Teague-Jones, *op cit*, p69.
 176 India Office Library, IOR /L/PS/11/138, Telegram 65148 M O 1 from C in C India to the War Office.
 177 Knollys, *op cit*, p100.
 178 eg Teague-Jones, *op cit*, p175.
 179 Teague-Jones, *op cit*, p86.
 180 Ullman, *op cit*, p321.
 181 Ellis, *op cit*, p26.
 182 Bailey, *op cit*, p218.
 183 Bailey, *op cit*, p289.
 184 Hopkirk, P, *Setting the East Ablaze*, Oxford: OUP, p63.
 185 Hopkirk, *op cit*, pp65-6.
 186 Bailey, *op cit*, p140.
 187 India Office Library, IOR/L/PS/18/C198, p105. Copy of Telegram from the Viceroy Foreign dated 19th Nov 1919 quoting a telegram from Malleson of November 16th.
 188 Moberly, *op cit*, p399.
 189 Teague-Jones, *op cit*, p148.
 190 Moberly, *op cit*, p403.
 191 Moberly, *op cit*, p403.
 192 Teague-Jones, *op cit*, p147.
 193 Teague-Jones, *op cit*, p149.
 194 Moberly, *op cit*, pp425-6.
 195 Teague-Jones, *op cit*, p149.
 196 Moberly, *op cit*, p435.
 197 Ellis, *op cit*, p115.
 198 Moberly, *op cit*, p438.
 199 India Office Library, IOR/L/MIL/5/807.
 200 India Office Library, IOR/L/MIL/5/807.

- 201 Moberly, *op cit*, p436. On 31 December 1918 he cabled speaking of a perpetual Bolshevik menace at the rear and goes on, according to Moberly p 437 to say “Turkomans formed 75% of the population but could not be armed owing to Russian jealousy; the Russians themselves were generally lazy, worthless and cowardly; and the Armenians, thousands of whom were armed, were treacherous, unreliable and constantly intriguing”.
- 202 Moberly, *op cit*, p441.
- 203 Moberly, *op cit*, p440.
- 204 India Office Library, IOR/L/MIL/5/807.
- 205 Confirmation of the sums paid in December comes from Moberly, *op cit*, p432 where the figures are given as 2 million roubles, 5 million roubles and £100,000.
- 206 Ellis, *op cit*, p93.
- 207 Moberly, *op cit*, p429.
- 208 Moberly, *op cit*, p431.
- 209 Ellis, *op cit*, p92; Moberly, *op cit*, pp431, 432.
- 210 Ellis, *op cit*, p91.
- 211 The account of this incident – including the reference to Krasnovodsk - is based on Teague-Jones, *op cit*, pp161-6.
- 212 Teague-Jones, *op cit*, p166.
- 213 Ellis, *op cit*, p152.
- 214 Teague-Jones, *op cit*, p168 ff.
- 215 Ellis, *op cit*, p152.
- 216 Teague-Jones, *op cit*, p201.
- 217 Ellis, *op cit*, p152.
- 218 Moberly, *op cit*, pp424-5.
- 219 Knollys, *op cit*, p106.
- 220 Moberly, *op cit*, p435.
- 221 Moberly, *op cit*, p420.
- 222 Uloth, *op cit*, p144.
- 223 Knollys, *op cit*, p108; Moberly, *op cit*, p442.
- 224 Knollys, *op cit*, p108; Moberly, *op cit*, p444.
- 225 Moberly, *op cit*, p444.
- 226 Ellis, *op cit*, p135.
- 227 Ellis, *op cit*, p144.
- 228 The remainder of this paragraph is based on Moberly, *op cit*, pp445-7.
- 229 Moberly, *op cit*, p448.
- 230 Moberly, *op cit*, p448.
- 231 Malleson, W, “The British Military Mission to Turkestan”, *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society*, Vol IX, 1922.
- 232 Knollys, *op cit*, p135.
- 233 Ellis, *op cit*, p156.
- 234 Ellis, *op cit*, p154; Becker, *op cit*, p276.
- 235 Bailey, *op cit*, pp238, 289.
- 236 Moberly, *op cit*, p449.
- 237 Malleson, *op cit*, p101.
- 238 Ellis, *op cit*, p156.
- 239 Teague Jones, *op cit*, p201; Malleson, *op cit*, p101. Their accounts agree in outline; they differ in details of the attacks that were rumoured to be about to happen.
- 240 India Office Library, IOR/L/MIL/5/897, “Expenditure on Malleson Mission and Troops in East Persia, 1918 to 1921”.
- 241 Moberly, *op cit*, p447.
- 242 Ellis, *op cit*, p156.
- 243 Ellis, *op cit*, p164.
- 244 This paragraph is based on Ellis, *op cit*, p157.
- 245 Fraser-Tytler, W K, *Afghanistan*, London: OUP, 1967, p192.
- 246 Ellis, *op cit*, p158.
- 247 Ellis, *op cit*, p159; Malleson, *op cit*, p102 ff.
- 248 Blacker, L V S, “Travels in Turkistan 1918-20”, *Geographical Journal*, Vol 58, No 3 (September 1921), p195.
- 249 Blacker, L V S, *On Secret Patrol in High Asia*, London: John Murray, 1922, p196.

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²⁵⁰ Malleon, *op cit*, p97.

²⁵¹ Ellis, *op cit*, p145.

²⁵² Teague-Jones, *op cit*, p202.

²⁵³ See the Introduction and Epilogue by Peter Hopkirk to Teague-Jones, *The Spy Who Disappeared*, *op cit*.

²⁵⁴ India Office Library, IOR/L/MIL/5/807.

²⁵⁵ Tempers were roused, and we thus have Lord Curzon writing on 15 April 1920 to E S Montague, Secretary of State for India, "If India disinterests herself in East Persia (to which she and not we insisted on despatching Malleon's Mission) the Foreign Office will feel no disposition to recognise, as they have hitherto done, the predominant interest of India in these regions." India Office Library, IOR/L/MIL/5/807.

²⁵⁶ Moberly, *op cit*, p450.

²⁵⁷ See, for example Kunitz, J, *Dawn over Samarkand*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1936, p102 ff.

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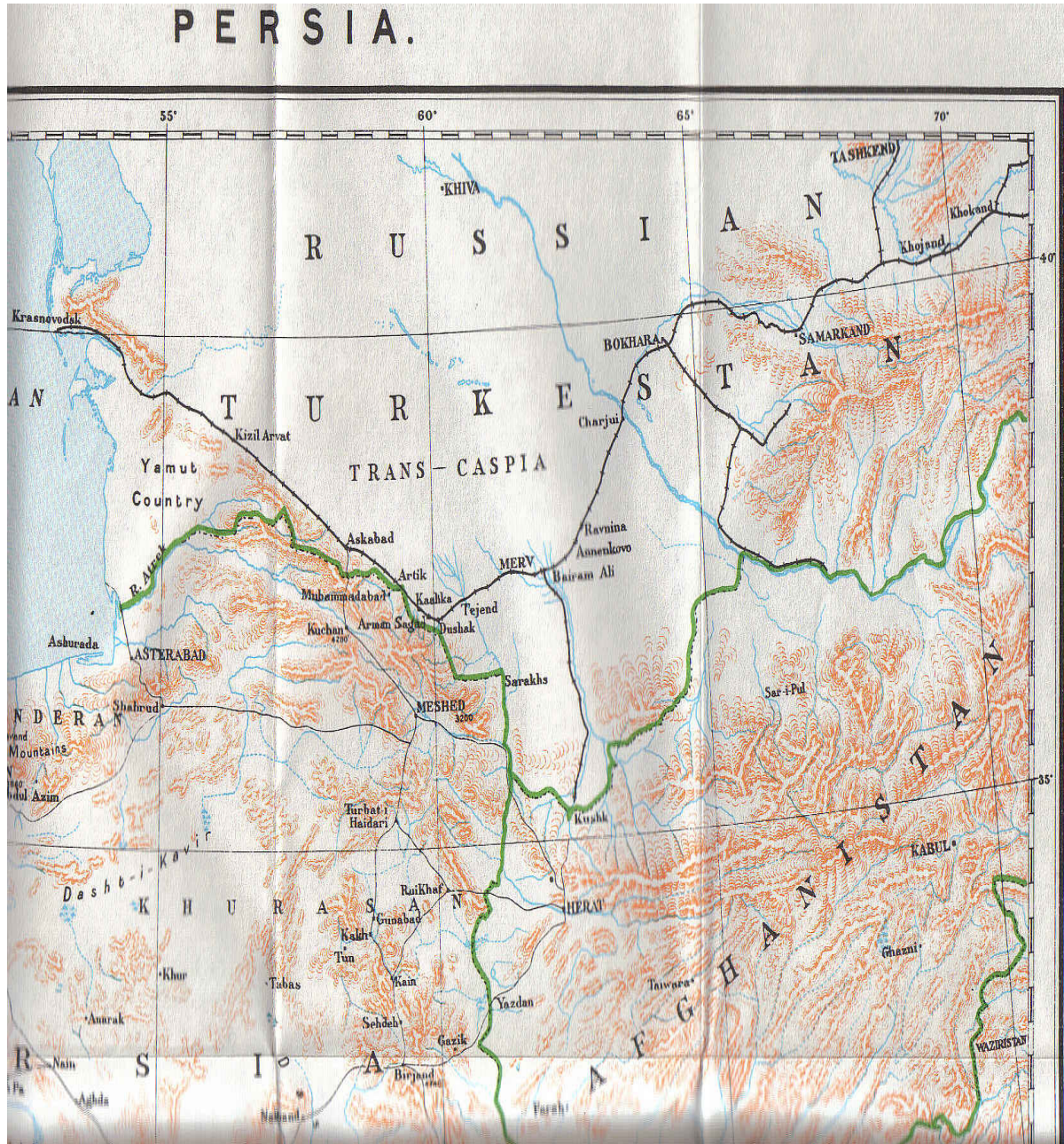
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Appendix 1 - Map of Transcaspia



The map is copied from Moberly, F J, *Operations in Persia 1914-1919*, London: HMSO, 1987, first published in November 1929.

Appendix 2

India Office Library, IOR/L/MIL/5/807, "Expenditure on Malleson Mission and Troops in East Persia, 1918 to 1921", p6.

"(xii) On March 1919 the Indian Government cabled details of the expenditure of General Malleson to date, which was as follows:-

	£
Pay charges	15,000
Secret Service; Turkestan	37,000
Other Secret Service	13,000
"Other Charges"	5,000
Charges of military forces	?
Road making	9,000
Payment to Askabad Government for rations supplied	100,000
Subsidy in December	100,000
Maintenance of railway service	80,000
Payment to Askabad Government in December	17,000
Expenses of withdrawal (estimate)	100,000
	<hr style="width: 100%; border: 0.5px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;"/> £476,000 "

Appendix 3

Distribution of Troops of the Malleson Mission at the end of December

Merv Area

Headquarters and one section 44th Battery, RFA
One company 1/ 4th Hampshire Regiment
Two squadrons 28th Light Cavalry
1/ 19th Punjabis (less one company)

Ashkabad

One company 9th Royal Warwickshire Regiment
One squadron 28th Light Cavalry
One company 1/ 19th Punjabis

Meshed

One squadron 28th Light Cavalry
Details 1/ 19th Punjabis

(from Moberly, F J, *Operations in Persia, 1914-1919*, London: HMSO, 1987 p437.)

Appendix 4

General Malleon

It is difficult to get much of an impression of General Malleon. He certainly does not come through as a larger-than-life figure.

Colonel Ellis, who was with General Malleon in Meshed and Transcaspia, gives us his military background.¹ He had been on the intelligence staff of the Indian Army G H Q and on Lord Kitchener's staff almost continuously from 1904 until 1914 and "was thoroughly conversant with conditions in Afghanistan and Persia". He spent a short period as brigade commander in East Africa in 1915 and 1916; otherwise most of his career was on staff and intelligence duties. In Ellis' view his choice as commander was due to his "exceptional knowledge and ability" as an intelligence officer, rather than a commander of troops – a role "clearly not foreseen in Simla" when the mission was first mooted.

Ellis describes him as "conscientious, meticulous in small matters and hardworking, Malleon was a lonely man ..." and as having "the reputation of a somewhat dour personality with little interest in society or the lighter graces of an army career." Certainly those of his officers who subsequently wrote about the Mission do not fall over themselves to shower him with praise. Ellis' words are the kindest that can be found. To Blacker he was barely worth a mention; in over 100 pages dealing with his time with the Malleon Mission his commander-in chief's name occurs once. He is not mentioned at all in Uloth's book, though Uloth was at Meshed and in Transcaspia from January 1918 to February 1919. Bailey has only a few words to say about him, and appears to have resented what he felt were inadequate attempts by the Mission in Meshed to get in touch with him while he was in Turkestan.²

Teague-Jones, who sharpened his pen when he was writing his diary, had little time for Malleon. We have already seen his comments on the Turkestan Union (where certainly the evidence does not support Ellis' view of Malleon as an intelligence officer of exceptional knowledge and ability), and he follows this up with criticism of Malleon's long-winded telegrams to India. "It became notorious that any statement by any casual agent or camel driver in the bazaar would be made the subject of a long foolscap wire."³

Malleon later was felt by some (including himself) to have done great intelligence work in relation to Afghanistan and Russia: "I had relays of men constantly coming and going in areas which I deemed important. There was hardly a train on the Central Asian railway which had not one of our agents on boards, and there was no important railway centre which had not two or three men on the spot."⁴ This may be true, but a pinch of salt would be useful.

Another pertinent criticism, and an entirely justified one, is that General Malleon remained comfortably in Meshed and crossed to Transcaspia for the first time on 24 November.⁵ This is inexcusable. He had an outstanding Political Officer in Ashkhabad in Teague-Jones, but one who was also hyper-active. He required support and guidance from someone who had seen and understood the situation on the ground. This Malleon could not provide. Less important perhaps, but equally reprehensible, was the fact that Malleon failed to visit his troops at the front for three months.

It is ironic that Malleon was not good at giving personal encouragement to those working under him on the ground, while complaining, as we have seen, about the failure of anyone from India to visit him. However it is worth bearing in mind the isolated environment in which he worked. There is no doubt he was given an extremely difficult task to perform, and, though Simla and London were at the end of the telegraph (sometimes to his dismay) his was a lonely and, at the end of the day, thankless duty, not helped by instructions and guidance that were at times confused and confusing. On the other hand it is also worth remembering that the open-ended commitments that he made, financial and political, in the Ashkhabad Protocol were somewhat unwise; they were promises that could not be fulfilled.

Malleon's role was never an easy one in a fast-moving climate of political change and confusion, and he could never make a perfect score. However it is difficult to rate him highly on his strong forward policy, particularly when he was perfectly well aware of the weakness and rottenness of the Transcaspian government on which his policy had, perforce, to rely. The decision to move British troops into Transcaspia was not his – it was urged by India and by London. However, thereafter he set the pace, with the support, at times, of the War Office in London, and the realisation that things had changed strategically with the ending of the First World War came slowly to him. He had the courage to advance with a small force at the end of very long lines of communication, but it is noteworthy that when General Milne produced his report on 1 February 1919 and made it abundantly clear the only effective option was withdrawal there was no dissent. Malleon had not seen what was clear to Milne.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Ellis, *op cit*, p25.
- 2 Bailey, *op cit*, p290.
- 3 Teague-Jones, *op cit*, pp78-79.
- 4 Malleon, *op cit*, p106.
- 5 Teague-Jones, *op cit*, p149; Moberly, *op cit*, pp425-6 gives the date as around 17 November.

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ISBN 1-904423-63-9

Published By:

Defence Academy of the
United Kingdom

Conflict Studies Research Centre

Haig Road
Camberley
Surrey
GU15 4PQ
England

Telephone: (44) 1276 412995

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ISBN 1-904423063-9