

# Empire in the Shadows of the Bolsheviks

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This thesis seeks to explain inconsistencies in British imperial policy in the Middle East during the interwar period, specifically from 1918 to 1922. The British Empire during this time faced numerous challenges to its hegemonic authority, including a rising tide of nationalism in the developing world and a new Bolshevik Russian state that seemed determined to spread the principles of communist revolution across the world. In the Middle East, this Bolshevik threat was particularly acute, given the close geographic proximity of Russian and Central Asia. In the years after World War One, the records of the British Empire display an official anxiety about the spread of Bolshevism that bordered on paranoia. This paranoia generated a great deal of British policy apparently in reaction to Bolshevism, and these various policies tended to pull an overstretched imperial administration in multiple directions at once. This all took place in a context of post-war military draw-down and public war weariness, both which threatened to pull the rug out from under officials seeking to remake the British Empire in Central Asia.

This study first examines the British intelligence community in the Middle East to ascertain how Britain understood and failed to understand the Middle East and Bolshevism itself. It then explores the variety of different British policies relating to Bolshevism and the motivations behind each. Finally, this thesis seeks to explain the inconsistencies and incongruities present in Britain's Middle Eastern Bolshevik policy. In explaining these policies, it will explore the ways in which Bolshevism as a term was used and manipulated by British officials and colonial elites. We find that the variety of different policy reactions to Bolshevism were products of multiple different policy agendas that all co-opted the idea of Bolshevik uprising and used it rhetorically to further divergent goals. Specifically, the Bolshevik threat was most often misrepresented in order to justify and explain the expansion of the British Empire in societies that continually rejected Britain's interfering presence.

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## Introduction

As World War I came to a close, London found itself at the head of the largest empire the world had ever seen. Between 1914 and 1919 the British government had vastly expanded the territory under its control. The majority of this empire's new acquisitions were in the Middle East and Central Asia, territories formerly held by the Ottoman Turkish Empire, which met its demise during the Great War. The British struggled to find ways to control this vast and inhospitable domain even as their wartime apparatus dissolved under the pressures of the public's war weariness and extreme fiscal strain.

Concurrently, Lenin's Bolshevik Revolution had, in 1917, succeeded in toppling the Kerensky government in Moscow. Throughout 1918, 1919, and 1920, the Bolsheviks waged a civil war for control of their country; their enemies were tsarist and moderate leaders who received huge amounts of financial and military assistance from the British. As the Bolsheviks pushed their foes back from the cities of Russia, the fighting spread to Transcaucasia and Transcaspia, along the northern border of Britain's newly acquired Middle Eastern possessions. Simultaneously, Lenin's government worked to extend its communist uprising to other nations and make a truly international revolution.

From 1919-1921, a series of uprisings, revolts, and agitations against British rule rocked the Middle East, and threatened to exhaust the imperial forces of occupation. Historians have established that the Bolshevik state, while supporting and promoting these uprisings, was in no way responsible for their outbreak, and that in general, the strength of Islam in the Middle East severely limited the possibilities of spreading atheist Bolshevism. Thus, as Britain quashed these uprisings and ruthlessly implemented a new form of modern despotic empire, the Bolsheviks eventually ran out of steam and consolidated their European and Central Asian holdings into a Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. By 1923, a status quo of sorts had returned to the region, with the British and their subject governments

controlling everything south of the Black and Caspian Seas, and the communists ruling northwards from Transcaspia and Transcaucasia.

This series of events does not explain the countless writings of officials in the British Empire who were certain that the Bolshevik menace was about to swallow all of South and West Asia, from Jerusalem to Kolkata. The treatment of Bolshevism by British officials, both those on the ground in the Middle East and those in London and India, demands further investigation. An analysis of the writings that they left behind indicates that officials of the British government, in their Middle Eastern and Central Asian holdings in the interwar period, not only tended to misunderstand the region and their enemy, but also tended to misrepresent the severity of the Bolshevik threat in order to justify and legitimize the role of the British Empire during a period of public criticism and scrutiny both in the region and at home.

Before delving further, it is important to recognize that multiple different historical dialogues provide context for this work, and that the work is conducted within the specific framework of a cultural history, focusing on the norms, beliefs, and values held by a group of individuals; in this case the leaders and the personnel of the British Empire. The study of Britain's interwar reactions to Bolshevism in the Middle East is at a confluence of three separate historical dialogues, all equally rich in thoughtful analysis. First of all, it deals with a historical dialogue relating to Britain and Bolshevik Russia in the international community. This field of study has generally sought to explain the British intervention in the Russian Civil War and the Allied policy of non-recognition towards the Bolsheviks. The dialogue could generally be classified as a diplomatic history, and sometimes tends to bleed chronologically forward into the 1940s and the beginning of the Cold War. This study is generally focused on the work of diplomats like R.H. Bruce Lockhart, the British ambassador in Moscow, and his Russian counterpart in Britain, Maxim Litvinov, as well as the attitudes of Lenin, Churchill, David Lloyd George, and other foreign policy-

makers. Richard Ullman and Richard Pipes, in their works *Anglo-Soviet Relations: Intervention and War* and *The Formation of the Soviet Union*, respectively, provide a link to this discourse; they are reinforced in this paper by relevant primary sources like the writings of Churchill and Lenin. These sources are important not only for providing global diplomatic context but also for their specific insights into the interactions between Britain and states closer to the Soviet sphere, such as Turkey, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkestan, and even Persia.

The study of Anglo-Soviet relations and their foreign policies is in many ways distinct from the study of Bolshevism within British society. Some historians have examined the relationship, not between the British foreign policy apparatus and its Soviet analogue, but between British minds and the ideological threat posed by international communism. These historians have typically sought to uncover and explain British anxieties about Bolshevism and show how these paranoias and anxieties were reflected in British imperial and domestic policy, both of which experienced radical changes in the 1920s. This is in many ways the history of a Red Scare, which captured a huge amount of British opinion in the years immediately following the First World War. Susan Kent's *Aftershocks*, Priya Satia's *Spies in Arabia*, and David Fromkin's *The Peace to End All Peace* are very helpful in incorporating this field of study; relevant primary source data is plentiful in the form of personal writings and official communications by a broad range of British policy makers.

Satia's and Fromkin's work is especially useful because they provide a bridge between the cultural history of Bolshevism in the British mind and the third major relevant historical conversation, which deals with the British Empire in the Middle East. This last discourse is the most closely tied with this thesis, and provides rich context for the interactions between Britain and Bolshevism in Central Asia. This field of study is also most integral for analyzing the impacts of British perceptions and the outcomes of British policy in the region. The greatest difficulty in incorporating this area of study has proven to be the huge number of secondary sources focused on the formation of modern Israel and Britain's

interactions with Arabs and Zionism. Britain's role in the roots of the Jewish State is grounds for fascinating inquiry, but is only peripherally related to this work. Avoiding this enormous volume of writing, this thesis instead relies on more specific local histories for context and useful data. Dennis Wright's record of the British Empire in Persia complements Mohammed Gholi Majd's national history of Iran quite well in describing the British intervention in Iran. Toby Dodge's history of British administration in Iraq serves as an excellent supplement to Satia's work for investigations in the Arab world. Elizabeth Monroe and John Darwin's writing provides a highly useful framework for analyzing all British imperial policy from Cairo to Kolkata. As mentioned above, Fromkin and especially Satia help tie Darwin's work and the historiography of the British Empire in the Middle East to the ongoing conversation about Bolshevism and the leaders of Britain.

It is probably clear by this point that primary source data for this investigation comes mainly from the writings of Britons involved in or related to the policy-making process. The British National Archives Cabinet Papers, a thorough collection of minutes, memoranda, and reports to the British Cabinet, is invaluable as a source on the higher echelons of the British Government, an echelon which included men like Earl George Curzon of Kedleston (Foreign Secretary, 1919-1924), David Lloyd George (Prime Minister, 1916-1922), and Edwin Montagu (Secretary of State for India, 1917-1922). This source is augmented by the Confidential Print of the Foreign Office, available from multiple different collections. In addition to flushing out the views of officials like Curzon and Montagu, the Foreign Office Print includes the reports and accounts of agents and officers on the ground across the Middle East and Central Asia. These agents and officers had an entirely different experience of the British Empire and their viewpoint is also crucial to this study. These official publications are supplemented further by private writings. The personal accounts of Major General Dunsterville, Sir George Macartney, Gertrude Bell, and others offer insights that are sometimes more candid than those which appear in official communication.

This approach, using three-dimensional analysis of these peoples' own writings to attempt to understand their reality, reveals the specific methodological framework behind this investigation. This thesis is most accurately categorized as a cultural history, because it relies on in-depth and highly critical analysis of these writings with an eye towards understanding the thought processes and motivations of the leaders and servitors of the British Empire. This examination does not try to explain what actually occurred between Bolsheviks and natives of the Middle East and Central Asia. The focus of this study is the imperial mind and the norms, beliefs, and values that drive it to think and react in the way that it does. For the British in the interwar Middle East, these norms, beliefs, and values were often out of sync with reality, but that did not stop them from having a very real impact on the policies of the British Empire.

## **Chapter 1: How Britain Understood (Or Failed to Understand) Bolshevism and the Middle East**

Before diving into the details of Central Asia, we must take a moment to examine the relationship between Britain and Bolshevism globally. When we look at Anglo-Soviet relations during the war and in the post-war years, we find that internationally Britain approached the Bolshevik class movement with a certain unshakeable psychological dichotomy. On the one hand, British government officials liked to attribute every issue of the early 1920s, from gender equality to Irish nationalism, to a Bolshevik plot. Bolshevism as a threat to stability within the borders of empire produced incredible paranoia among the British. At the same time, many administrators insisted on the Soviet Union as a traditional state actor. Certain imperial functionaries shifted their viewpoints on the subject over the course of months or years. Others used the term “Bolshevik” at times to refer to Lenin’s party in Moscow and at other times to refer to revolutionary agitation elsewhere in the world, communist-inspired or not.

British policy and diplomacy toward the Soviet Union in the interwar period often attempted to predict and direct the actions of the Soviet government as a classical nation-state along the lines of tsarist Russia, concerned with national interests, and not as “the vanguard of the international revolutionary proletariat.”<sup>1</sup> Even when Britain eventually agreed to recognize the Soviet government in Petrograd, the thinking of British diplomatic officials betrayed a lack of understanding of Soviet goals and worldviews. We see this break between British and Soviet ideas of government and security most clearly in the immediate aftermath of the November Revolution. As Richard Ullman explains, Britain’s sole initial goal concerning the Bolsheviks was to ensure ongoing Russian participation in the First World War. This quickly threw London and Petrograd into conflict over the refusal of the Bolshevik government to recognize the Entente agreement of September 1914, which among other things, forbade the Allies from

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<sup>1</sup> Lenin, V.I., Tim Delaney trans. *What is to Be Done?*. 1902. The Marxist Internet Archive.

concluding a separate peace with the Central Powers. The British considered a Russian withdrawal to be nothing short of betrayal. The British Foreign Minister, Lord Balfour, asserted that “I doubt whether this doctrine, inconsistent as it clearly is with any kind of stability in international agreements, will commend itself to a Russian government that can claim with justice to represent the Russian people.”<sup>2</sup> He and others assumed that the people in control of Russia identified with and felt loyalty to the Russian Empire and its national allies. But from the point of view of a true Bolshevik, continued participation in an imperialist war would constitute a betrayal of their people and the proletariat class. Lord Balfour was not alone in this mistaken imagining of Bolshevik intentions. Captain Wright, a British agent tasked with observing the Bolshevik advance, described the Bolshevik administration as simply “a parody of the Tsarist administration.”<sup>3</sup> For many in the British government, that succinct diagnosis summed up the political situation in Russia.

This view of the Soviet government was common in British offices and bases across the Middle East and Central Asia. To some of these men, Bolshevism was merely a new guise for an agenda familiar from the so-called “Great Game” era of the late nineteenth century. Oliver Wardrop, the British Chief Commissioner of Transcaucasus, believed that the Bolshevik government in Russia did little to distinguish its eastern policies from earlier manifestations: “[Russia], whether she be under German influence or Bolshevik or Denikinist, will inevitably give us continual trouble.”<sup>4</sup> Lord Curzon agreed with Wardrop, stating that Bolshevism was no more than a “cloak for Russian imperialism.” Winston Churchill’s comment that a failure to defend Persia would result in Tehran being “demoralized by Russian Bolshevism and thereafter devoured by Russian imperialism”<sup>5</sup> indicated a similar mindset.

However, for every agent who was inclined to discredit Bolshevism as a Russian ploy, there was another determined to warn the Empire of the international and revolutionary character of Lenin’s

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2 Ullman, Richard. *Anglo-Soviet Relations, 1917-1921*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961. 27.

3 Anonymous. “Polish Peace Terms to the Bolsheviks,” Cabinet Papers, CAB 24/101 (CP 937). 161.

4 Wardrop, Sir Oliver. *Confidential Print: The Middle East 1839-1969*. London: His Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1922. Marlborough: Adam Matthew Publications. FO 406/42: Eastern Affairs, Further Correspondence, Part III. 67.

5 Churchill, Winston. Memorandum by the Secretary of State for War. Cabinet Papers, CAB 24/107 (CP 1467). 250.

movement. In particular, Britons who had travelled to Bolshevik Russia were convinced of the sincerity of the Bolsheviks and their cause. An article by a British author returning from Russia was circulated by the Home Secretary in a weekly intelligence summary. The article warned that the chief source of danger from Russia was the international character of the Bolshevik movement, which “enables the Bolsheviks to find allies and accomplices in the most unexpected places outside Russia.”<sup>6</sup> The same intelligence survey quoted a speech by Lenin in which he flatly denied Russian imperial ambitions and confirmed his commitment to international revolution: “It is not for us, however, to take back what formerly belonged to Russia. Our task is to root out the British imperialistic spirit in Turkey, Persia, and Asia generally.”<sup>7</sup> A War Office report quoted George Lansbury, a prominent Labor politician and himself a suspected socialist, who on his return to Sweden from Russia affirmed in no uncertain terms that the main object of the Soviets was still to spark international revolution in Europe and Asia.<sup>8</sup>

This view also had its proponents on the ground in Asia. Major A.E.R. McDonnell, the British vice consul at Baku, stated in his discussion of Bolshevism in the Caucasus that “the great mistake made by so many, especially the Russians, merely consists of killing Bolsheviks and conquering the territory they occupy, whereas in reality the struggle against Bolshevism is in reality a struggle against idea or doctrine.”<sup>9</sup> Acting Minister to Tehran Sir Percy Cox’s concern that the governments of Transcaucasia may at any moment “turn Bolshevik”<sup>10</sup> articulated an appreciation for the international character of Lenin’s communism.

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6 United Kingdom. A Monthly Review of Revolutionary Movements in British Dominions Overseas and Foreign Countries. Cabinet Papers, CAB 24/108 (CP 1587). 365.

7 Ibid. p. 49.

8 Lansbury, George. On the Foreign Policy of the Soviet Government, in A Monthly Review of Revolutionary Movements in British Dominions Overseas and Foreign Countries. CAB 24/104 (CP 1130). 137.

9 McDonnell. Report on the Georgian Government. *Confidential Print: The Middle East 1839-1969*. London: His Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1922. Marlborough: Adam Matthew Publications. FO 406/42: Eastern Affairs, Further Correspondence, Part III. 19.

10 Watt, D. Cameron, ed. *British Documents on Foreign Affairs- reports and papers from the foreign office confidential print, Part II*. Frederick, Maryland: University Publications of America, 1984. Series B: Turkey, Iran and the Middle East, Volume II: 1920-1921. Document 106.

In the end, Prime Minister David Lloyd George gave perhaps the best summary of the intelligence situation on Bolshevism in a Cabinet meeting in 1918, saying that

He himself had found himself frequently leaning first in one direction, and then in another, owing to the absolute contradiction between the information supplied from Russia by men of equally good authority. We were, in fact, never dealing with ascertained, or, perhaps, even ascertainable, facts. Russia was a jungle in which no one could say what was within a few yards of him.<sup>11</sup>

The contradictions and dichotomies that lurked amongst Britons' various definitions of Bolshevism were never really addressed by the British government. As a result, agents in the field and politicians in the metropole used the term to mean a variety of different things. To some, Bolsheviks were specifically the men in Lenin's government who were leading in Moscow. However, others were able to cry "Bolshevik" whenever it suited their purposes, usually when popular discontent called for Britain's retreat from a colonized territory.

A great deal of excellent historical work has been done exploring the world of interwar British intelligence in the Middle East. It seems that, for all of the world-altering affects Britain had on the Middle East, its agents knew very little about the region. Terrain and migrant populations made intelligence-gathering difficult. This difficulty was exacerbated by the chronic shortages of personnel and funding available in the interwar Empire. In the face of these overwhelming difficulties, it became the norm for a very questionably qualified body of agents to substitute fantasy for fact and replaced empirically inducted conclusions with suppositions.

In the Middle East, the British intelligence apparatus encountered more challenges than it had ever before. For one thing, the desert terrain made cartography and mapping difficult. David Hogarth, an

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<sup>11</sup> George, David Lloyd. Minutes of a Meeting of the Imperial War Cabinet, 12 December 1918. Cabinet Papers, CAB 23/42. 63.

officer with the Naval Intelligence Division and head of the Arab Bureau during World War I, summed up the lack of any real intelligence in Mesopotamia, Arabia, and the Levant:

In Western Asia . . . we have regions visited by perhaps a score of travelers since the revival of learning, but inhabited by peoples of whom we have learned much less than about the Polar Eskimo . . . and in short, we have a whole of which only the coasts, two tiny corners, Palestine and Sinai, and the narrow belts visible from half a dozen lines of railway and two navigable rivers, have been surveyed with anything approaching to scientific precision.<sup>12</sup>

Travel and surveying became difficult and judgments of space and distance became nearly impossible in the endless deserts of the region. Prewar maps and surveys were virtually nonexistent, leading David Fromkin to conclude that during the war “the British government lacked even the most elementary types of information- including maps- of the empire with which it was at war.”<sup>13</sup>

This void of empirical intelligence also applied to the rugged mountains of Persia and Central Asia. Colonel F.M. Bailey, a spy dispatched by Simla to the Bolshevik center of Tashkent, reported extreme difficulties in transportation, navigation, and communication while travelling through Persia and Turkestan.<sup>14</sup> He explained how just “one of our anxieties and difficulties was the question of communication”; these communication issues were so severe that he took a number of carrier pigeons with him to help, but “the experiment did not work.”<sup>15</sup>

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12 Hogarth, David. “The Problems in Exploration I: Western Asia”. *Geographical Journal*, Volume 32, No. 6 (December 1908). 550.

13 Satia, Priya. *Spies in Arabia*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. 102, 103, 107, See also Fromkin, David. *The Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East*. New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1989. 86.

14 Bailey, Colonel F.M. *Mission to Tashkent*. Oxford: Alden Press, 1946. 16, 27, 106-107.

15 Ibid 16.

The drive to substitute intuition for fact was compounded by Orientalist stereotypes and convictions about the mysterious nature of the land and the people. The belief of Britons both in the region and in London was that these other peoples had specific ways of thinking and behaving that were inscrutable to Westerners. C.E. Callwell's book on "Small Wars" explicated this mindset perfectly:

The difficulty of dealing with Orientals and savages, either as informers or spies, is discussed in many textbooks . . . The ordinary native found in theatres of war peopled by coloured races lies simply for the love of the thing, and his ideas of time, numbers, and distance are of the vaguest, even when he is trying to speak the truth.<sup>16</sup>

Fromkin describes similar broad generalizations about the nature of Arabs (whether Egyptian or Arabian made no difference) made by Kitchener and his lieutenants.<sup>17</sup> These Orientalist ideas were institutionalized in the British Empire, and had very real policy effects.

All of this took place in a climate of extreme budget draw-down for the British Empire. Following Britain's fall from a creditor nation to a debtor nation during the war, the British government, especially the Minister of Munitions and later Secretary of State for Air, Winston Churchill, was frantic to reduce military and administrative expenditures. The resulting funding cuts were painful for the British imperial apparatus in the Middle East, mainly because the vast army of British personnel stationed in the Middle East "melted away" in a matter of months.<sup>18</sup> The intelligence machinery already hindered by the difficulties inherent in the region was forced to rely on a small number of very questionably qualified and highly independent agents to monitor and police an area many times the size of Britain itself. These agents and administrators had few resources at their disposal and little foundation to build from. Toby Dodge, in his work

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16 Callwell, C.E. *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice*. Woolwich: General Staff War College, 1906. 49-50.

17 Fromkin, 90-91.

18 Ibid. 386-387.

on the making of modern Iraq, claims that “the geographical area in which the state was to be constructed was not subjected to a detailed examination by any of the four British High Commissioners charged with the responsibility for its creation.”<sup>19</sup> This disregard for empirical data did not help the quality of British intelligence gathering.

The real and imagined problems of intelligence gathering caused British administrators to turn increasingly to that age-old expedient of military communication and intelligence: trust in “the man on the spot”. Edwardian agents commonly held the notion that failures of empirical intelligence could be made up for by the canny experience, intuition, and insight of a veteran man on the spot. This faith that an experienced agent could substitute intuition and natural skill for technical procedure was a consistent pattern in interwar British intelligence in the Middle East and Central Asia. Priya Satia describes this assumption about British agents: “To know the desert and collect information that moved in tandem with its nomadic population, they would have to inhabit it the way the nomads did.”<sup>20</sup> When describing Sir George Macartney, the British Consul-General in Chinese Turkestan, Colonel Bailey endorsed this sentiment, claiming that “his long experience in this out of the way spot had led him to consider questions of time and space which might escape the foresight of some of us.”<sup>21</sup> David Fromkin provides an excellent example of this phenomenon in his discussion of War Minister Horatio Herbert Kitchener and his aides, most notably Sir Gilbert Clayton and Sir Reginald Wingate. Fromkin describes how their time spent in Cairo as imperial administrators uncontestedly qualified them as experts on Eastern affairs, despite the fact that none had much formal education on the region’s people.<sup>22</sup>

This notion rides on the assumption that living and working in a region for any significant period of time made a Briton an expert not only on the more factual aspects of the region, but

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19 Dodge, Toby. *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003. 43.

20 Satia 116.

21 Bailey 22.

22 Fromkin 85-86, 90-91.

also inducted them into the subtle and intuitive secrets of the local people. Satia describes how British agents, when referring to intuition, often meant “the acquired ability to think like an Arab, an empathetic mimicry of the ‘Arab mind’. . .”<sup>23</sup> A British journalist wrote the following about Colonel Wingate’s insight: “As for that mysterious child of lies, the Arab, Colonel Wingate can converse with him for hours and at the end know not only how much truth he has told, but which truths he has suppressed.”<sup>24</sup> It was assumed not only that all Arabs thought the same way, but that this formulaic thought process could be mastered and interpreted like a cypher by an expert civilized mind.

However, this faith in the wisdom and esoteric ability of agents who were experienced in the desert did not often result in good intelligence. More often than not, the attitudes and personal psychology of the agents pushed their reports across the line between fact and fiction. Satia explains that “As a genre, exploration reports had long exhibited a tension between reality and fiction, but in Edwardian reports from Arabia, this elision was the rule rather than the exception and was fully intended.”<sup>25</sup> Time and again, policy was founded on vague assumptions and assertions that better reflected the fantasies of European literature than the realities of the Middle East. Dodge describes at length the myriad policy effects this had on fledgling Iraq, arguing that “A lack of empirical data allowed a collective understanding of the nature and effect of Ottoman rule in Iraq to become dominant and to go unchallenged among the British staff.”<sup>26</sup> It is astonishing that, given the absence of empirical data, the British were able to act with such confidence and self-assuredness in the administration of the interwar Middle East. The conclusion of contemporary historians is that the agents who represented the British crown from North Africa to Persia were living in an esoteric and fanciful world that they themselves had

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23 Satia 100.

24 Fromkin 90.

25 Satia 107.

26 Dodge 43.

created to fill the voids of actual empirical intelligence in the Middle East. This fantasy world was based on their own paranoias, dreams, and spiritual beliefs, but failed to accurately reflect realities about either the land or its people.<sup>27</sup>

This thesis deals with misintelligence that is the child of two parents: general British misunderstanding of Bolshevism and the specific challenges of intelligence gathering in Central Asia. Colonel F.M. Bailey's candid statement of mission sums up the intelligence situation in the region quite succinctly:

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 find out what sort of people they were and to try to persuade them to continue the war against Germany . . .<sup>28</sup>

It is clear that the British Empire in the interwar Middle East was represented by individuals who, for the most part, had little idea of what was really going on. But no matter how badly British agents misunderstood the Middle East and its people, the British interwar administration of the Middle East did recognize Islam and Bolshevism as natural enemies. Influential officials throughout the British Foreign Office were convinced the Bolshevism and Islam were inherently incompatible and that their Islamic subjects would never ideologically accept Bolshevism or Bolshevik rule. General Haddad, a Syrian diplomatic agent living in London at the time, wrote that "We Arabs consider that, as far as their Middle East policy is concerned, the Soviet government is indistinguishable from the old Tsarist regime . . ." He went on to describe the people of Syria as "instinctively hostile to the principles of Bolshevism."<sup>29</sup> While it would not be surprising if the British ignored General Haddad's opinions about the beliefs of his people, his sentiments were echoed by personnel throughout the British hierarchy. W.J. Childs of the Foreign

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27 Satia 59.

28 Bailey 26.

29 Watt, Series B, Volume II: Document 1.

Office concluded, after a conversation with Henry Franklin-Boullion, President of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Chamber of Deputies, that “Moslems, he said, would never accept Bolshevism as a rule of life. Moslems were the natural barrier to the spread of Bolshevism in Asia.” Childs recounts the claims of Turkish delegates at the Baku conferences of 1920, who supposedly said that “This Bolshevism will not suit us; we must use the Bolsheviks, but we must never accept Bolshevism.”<sup>30</sup> Sir H. Rumbold, the Foreign Office authority in Constantinople, reported that the strain in Bolshevik-Turkish relations was caused largely by Turks who “fear penetration of Bolshevik principles into Asia Minor or who simply see old Russian menace behind present Bolshevik friendship.” Rumbold later offered an explanation for this tension by saying that “Moslem Turks could have nothing to do with Bolshevism, for it was incompatible with their religion . . .”, while E.W. Birse concluded that the people of Bokhara “loath” the Bolsheviks. Colonel Bailey likewise stated that “Mussalmans are not really Bolsheviks . . . We could now, with a small force, drive the Bolsheviks out of Turkestan and put the people in a position to defend themselves, and thus earn the gratitude of all Mussalmans of Turkestan.”<sup>31</sup>

This assuredness of the incompatibility of Bolshevism and Islam existed at the highest levels of the British imperial apparatus. The Consul-General of Kashgar, the same Sir George Macartney who Colonel Bailey so respected, explained that “The attitude of the Mohammedan population of Semirechia remains unchanged and they merely wish to be left alone, and for a stable Government to be re-established in Russia . . .” The Viceroy of India himself recognized the inherently different goals of the Bolsheviks and of the Indian revolutionaries working with them: “The Indian revolutionaries in Tashkent are regarded as of no account . . . as having no desire for ideal world revolution along Communist lines, but as cherishing purely selfish notions of setting up Indian autonomy along capitalist lines.” A report summarizing the global Bolshevik military situation in January of 1920 concluded that Bolshevik

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30 W.J. Childs. Notes on a Conversation with M. Franklin-Boullion. *Confidential Print: The Middle East 1839-1969*. London: His Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1922. Marlborough: Adam Matthew Publications. FO 406/49: Eastern Affairs, Further Correspondence, Part X. 60.

31 Watt Series A: The Soviet Union and Its Neighbors, Volume II: 1919-1920. Documents 27, 105, 123, 269.

attempts to combine Bolshevik ideology with Pan-Islamism “seem to be meeting with little or no success.”<sup>32</sup> Lord Curzon, in a letter to the Viceroy in 1921, referenced an apparently well-known dictum: “principle that there can be no real and lasting foundation for common action by Bolsheviks and Muslims.”<sup>33</sup> In his history of the formation of the Soviet Union, Richard Pipes points out that even “Among Muslims in Russia, Marxist influence was very limited, and where it did exist it was Menshevik in character . . . in November 1917, the Soviet government had, for all practical purposes, no basis for political action in the Muslim borderlands.”<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, discussions of the lurking threat of Bolshevism in those very borderlands would be revisited again and again by Britons across the Empire.

## **Chapter 2: The Diplomatic Threat of Bolshevism in Regional Politics**

Despite the apparent ideological contradiction, there was one prominent example of close political cooperation between Islamic states and Lenin’s government, and it provoked an intense reaction in Britain’s Asian empire. Between 1919 and 1921, ongoing negotiations between Afghanistan, Turkey,

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32 Ibid Documents 378, 380-383.

33 Curzon, George. Letter to the Viceroy, 16 July 1921. Cabinet Papers, CAB 24/126 (CP 3563). 641.

34 Pipes, Richard. *The Formation of the Soviet Union: Communism and Nationalism, 1917-1923*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1957. 156.

Persia, and the Bolshevik state (eventually called the U.S.S.R.) seemed to hold the promise of a general alliance between the four nations, which would give the Russians a significant diplomatic, economic, and propagandist foothold in the region and would destabilize the British presence, which was particularly strong in Persia. These negotiations were not a paranoid fantasy or the product of misintelligence, but were very real, and were in fact an attempt at exactly the kind of Bolshevik interference the British were so panicky about.<sup>35</sup>

It seems clear in hindsight that any hope Russia had of building a bloc of allied Islamic states to the south depended on the cooperation of Mustafa Kemal, the rising star of the Turkish nationalist movement. Even after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire as a result of the First World War, Turkey was one of the most developed and powerful Islamic states, and as the Greco-Turkish War raged in Anatolia, Mustafa Kemal and his compatriots occupied the center of the world stage. By 1920, the nationalist movement had succeeded in defying their numerous foes. The Turkish Committee of Union and Progress, the “Young Turks” who had steered the Ottoman Empire through the Great War, was struggling to hold onto power, and opposed the Nationalists. The Sultan in Istanbul, who was a virtual prisoner of the Allied Powers, also condemned them. The Allies were also publicly supporting the Kingdom of Greece, which was attempting to claim by force the portions of Turkey promised them in the 1920 Treaty of Sevres, the agreement that ended the war between the Allies and the Ottoman Empire. In the face of these foes, Kemal’s Nationalists formed their own government at the ancient Turkish seat of Ankara, “deep in the interior of the country and far from the sea and the guns of the British Navy.”<sup>36</sup>

From the Bolshevik perspective, Nationalist Turkey was not only a powerful, Islamic, revolutionary state, but one with a particular grudge against Great Britain, who had seized Turkey’s empire and supported the Greek advance across the Turkish homeland. From a strategic viewpoint, Turkey sat astride Russia’s traditional maritime lifeline through the Dardanelles and also held an

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35 Watt, Series B: Volume III, Document 162.

36 Fromkin 427-428.

influential position over the Caucasus, where Bolshevik troops battled Georgians and the forces of General Denikin, one of the most enduring White Russian commanders. Kemal was also thought to have significant influence over international Muslim opinion, and the long-time role of the Sultan as Islamic Khalifa gave Turkey a reputation as the leading front of Islamic peoples. From the end of World War I in 1918 to the stabilization of relations with the Turkish state in 1922-23, a close alliance between Lenin and Kemal was at the top of the British list of concerns.<sup>37</sup>

Afghanistan represented a totally different, but nonetheless significant, threat to the stability of the Empire in Asia. Conflict between the Emirate of Afghanistan and British India was a century-old trend. In 1919, the tense peace that had existed between India and Afghanistan broke down. The Emir was assassinated and his son, Amanullah Khan, eventually took the throne. Shortly thereafter, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Anglo-Afghan War broke out in the mountains. The war dragged on for several months before a tense stalemate resulted in the Treaty of Rawalpindi. This treaty assured the security of India below the historic Durand Line, but the British relinquished a long-defended privilege; after 1919 the British no longer had control over Afghanistan's foreign affairs. One of Afghanistan's first acts with its new diplomatic freedom was to court Bolshevik diplomats and open a Soviet consulate in Kabul.<sup>38</sup>

Afghanistan as a threat to the British Empire was at the opposite end of the spectrum from Turkey. Where Kemalist Turkey represented a significant challenge to British influence over the Muslim world as a whole and the internal stability of Britain's Middle Eastern empire, Afghanistan represented an external geostrategic danger to specific borders of the Empire. The leaders of the Raj had always seen the hostile tribes of Afghanistan as a hole in the defense of India, explaining the historical tension in the British imperial mind around Afghan independence, the strategic Khyber Pass, and the Durand Line. Three Anglo-Afghan Wars had failed to bring Afghanistan into the British fold. Richard Ullman explains

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37 Watt, Series A: Volume II, Document 17; Series B: Volume II, Documents 100, 193; Series B: Volume III, Document 185.

38 Fromkin 423.

the policy of the British government in nineteenth century India, which “had always been to encircle the country in order to keep it strictly neutral and thus prevent the entry of any disturbing influences. This policy had been successful, but with the advent of Bolshevism the northern part of the fence around Afghanistan had been torn down.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, where Turkey’s Bolshevik intrigues were worrisome in the danger they posed to leadership of the Islamic world, the threat of the Bolsheviks in Afghanistan was significantly closer to home.

The ancient kingdom of Persia, and the unique position it occupied after the war, is absolutely central to this study. More will be said about Persia below, but for the moment, it is merely important to point out that Persia was critical to both Russian and British strategic planning. Its geographic positioning alone made it important; directly to the south lay British India and Iraq, while directly to the north, the Transcaucasian and Transcaspian states had been abandoned to the Bolsheviks by 1920, making Persia a fault line between the two powers. Additionally, it bordered Turkey to the west and Afghanistan to the east, meaning that it formed the center of the chain of Islamic, Russia-friendly states which the Bolsheviks hoped to build. That said, Persia was also diplomatically the closest of the three states to Britain; the southern part of the country had fallen under the British Empire’s sphere of influence since the late 1800s. In 1919, Persia played host to a large number of British and Indian soldiers and administrators, while its government tended to toe the British line in foreign policy.<sup>40</sup> The British government had just concluded the Anglo-Persian Convention of 1919 with the ministry of Persian Prime Minister Vossough-ed-Dowleh, in order to, in the words of the historian Mohammed Gholi Majd, “formalize and perpetuate their political and commercial domination ” in Tehran.<sup>41</sup>

Despite British strength in Persia, it seemed in early 1921 that perhaps Russia’s diplomatic goal in the Middle East was coming to fruition. As early as 1919, the Bolshevik republics of Transcaucasia had

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39 Ullman 313.

40 Majd, Mohammed Gholi. *Great Britain and Reza Shah: The Plunder of Iran, 1921-1941*. Gainesville, et al: Florida University Press, 2001. 25-30. See also Ullman 303, Watt, Series A, Volume II: Document 275, 349-350, 364.

41 Ibid. 35.

concluded treaties with Kemalist Turkey, paving the way for a potential broad Russo-Turkish agreement in the future.<sup>42</sup> An intelligence report claimed in May of 1920 that just such an agreement had been concluded in secret between Kemal's Nationalists and Lenin's Bolsheviks.<sup>43</sup> Following the Treaty of Rawalpindi in 1919, the Emir of Afghanistan had opened his country to Bolshevik consulates and seemed to be open to working with Russia against the British.<sup>44</sup> Meanwhile, Soviet military forces had seized the Gilan province of north-eastern Persia and allowed for the creation there of a Persian Socialist Republic, offering a possible diplomatic-propagandist foothold in British-dominated Persia.<sup>45</sup> Bolshevik briefs intercepted by Colonel Bailey in Tashkent reveal that in mid-1919 "We [the Communist Party of Tashkent] think that Persia will soon receive our representative . . . this was repeated by two Persian revolutionaries, who added that they would return to Persia and prepare revolution."<sup>46</sup> In December of 1920, Nationalist sources in Ankara reported to the British that Bolshevik aid to Turkey was being formalized and Bolshevik consulates were being opened around Anatolia. For the Bolsheviks, these diplomatic successes culminated in the Turco-Afghan Treaty, signed in March 1921 in Moscow.<sup>47</sup>

The significance of the signing location was not lost on the British; Sir H. Rumbold wrote to Lord Curzon that it was significant "that the present treaty should have been concluded at Moscow. One wonders what role the Soviet government have played in the matter . . ." Rumbold went on to point out that

It is also significant that the *Hakimiet-i-Millie* [Turkish periodical] summary represents Afghans as accepting a Turkish hegemony, but makes no mention of the Caliphate.

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42 Pipes 249.

43 Bray, Major N.N.E. *Mesopotamia: Causes of Unrest*- Report No. 11. Cabinet Papers, CAB 24/112 (CP 1990). 518.

44 Fromkin 423.

45 Fromkin 458-59, Majd 54.

46 Watt, Series A: Volume II, Document 278.

47 Watt, Series B: Volume II, Document 183.

Altogether, the treaty shows traces of Bolshevik inspiration, as would be expected from the fact of its having been negotiated in Moscow.<sup>48</sup>

These developments produced no shortage of consternation among the officials of the British Empire. Afghanistan seemed the most immediate threat; the mountain kingdom's hostility towards the British and its close proximity to India were cause for concern. In early 1919, E.W. Birse wrote that the Bolsheviks "may, very probably, send troops to the Afghan border and endeavor to rekindle the Afghan-Indian conflict."<sup>49</sup> A few months later, General Sir Charles Monro, Commander-in-Chief of forces in India, wrote to General Sir Henry Wilson, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, saying that ". . . we have public statement of Afghan consuls in Turkestan that in order to free Asia from the British yoke Afghanistan is now ready to join the Bolsheviks."<sup>50</sup> If the threat to India seemed significant, the threat that a Bolshevik-Afghan alliance would pose to north-west Persia seemed overwhelming, especially with Bolshevik troops already occupying the northeast of the country. E.W. Birse pointed out in his report that "It is also likely that they [the Bolsheviks] will attack the Khorasan province of North Persia, for Afghanistan and Persia form the natural conduit for reaching India and the Middle East generally." That same year, General Malleon, the commander of British forces at Mashhad in Persia, expressed concern in his field report about a joint Bolshevik-Afghan invasion of Persia. In October, Sir Percy Cox reiterated this concern to the Foreign Office, writing that the Bolsheviks were scheming to occupy the "Tashkent-Afghan corridor."<sup>51</sup> Clearly, Afghanistan's questionable status made British military planners extremely anxious.

For all the importance the British (especially the government of India) attached to Afghanistan, the military-political drama playing out in Turkey continued to hold center-stage in the early 1920s. The spectre of the Khalifat and Turkish influence in the Muslim world helps explain the importance of Turkey in the British Imperial mind. A Foreign Office report from as early as spring of 1919 discussed extensively

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48 Watt, Series A, Volume II, Document 182.

49 Ibid. Document 27.

50 Ibid. Document 236.

51 Ibid. Documents 248, 275.

how “Bolshevism is making determined, and by no means wholly unsuccessful attempts, to delude Muslims into believing that the Muslim world would do well in allying itself with Bolshevism in war against the British Empire. These efforts are being made at the present moment in Turkey . . .”<sup>52</sup> In January 1920, Commander Luke, the British commander at Constantinople, stated similar fears, claiming that “Very skillfully, too, the Bolsheviks are contriving to turn the somewhat vague and unformed aims of the pan-Islamic movement, such as it is, into anti-British channels.” Luke draws a link from Bolshevism to Pan-Islam by way of Mustapha Kemal and the Turkish Nationalists, and when Kemal summoned representatives from Muslim nations (including Persia, India, and Afghanistan) to Anatolia for a Pan-Islamic conference, Luke commented that the conference “will no doubt indulge in much anti-British propaganda, and they will be capable of doing a considerable amount of harm.”<sup>53</sup> A coincident report from the Monro to Sir Henry Wilson listed the “Growth of the Pan-Turanian movement and its alliance with Bolshevism” as the top concern on a list of threats to the British position in the Near East.<sup>54</sup> In summation, the Bolshevik alliance with Turkey gave the Bolsheviks “considerable prestige and a theoretical right to style themselves friends of Islam”<sup>55</sup>; the British could never rest easy in Mesopotamia, Arabia, Persia, Egypt, or India while a rival power could make that claim.

However, by 1922, the possibility of a grand anti-British alliance, if ever it had existed, seemed to be on the wane. Reza Shah Pahlavi’s coup d’état had suppressed Soviet ambitions in Persia and secured Persia’s place in the British sphere of influence.<sup>56</sup> As the Red Scare in Central Asia slowed down and the political tension in Afghanistan and Turkey decreased, the British attached less and less importance to the Bolshevik threat in the region. In March of 1920, Lord Chelmsford wrote from Simla that “the Bolsheviks are viewed with disfavor in many quarters of Afghanistan.”<sup>57</sup> General Malleon, who only six

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52 Ibid. Document 18.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid. Document 236.

55 Watt, Series B, Volume II, Document 100.

56 Fromkin 460, Majd 63-67.

57 Chelmsford, Lord Frederick Thesiger. Letter to the Secretary of State for India, 20 March 1920. Cabinet Papers, CAB 24/101 (CP 946). 243.

months previous had written his fears of an Afghan-Bolshevik invasion of Persia, reported a falling out between the two. Malleon wrote that "Afghans are losing ground fast with Bolshevik authorities chiefly because of increasing rumours regarding their treachery and Pan-Islamic intrigues." Malleon went on to describe how the Bolsheviks apparently suspect the entire Muslim population of Central Asia is being organized for revolt by the British and Afghans.<sup>58</sup> By March, E. W. Birse was discussing the possibility of fighting breaking out between the Russia and Afghanistan.<sup>59</sup>

In Turkey, during June 1921, British intelligence reported that "The relations between Nationalists and Bolsheviks continue to be characterized by much distrust and suspicion."<sup>60</sup> In a letter to Chelmsford around the same time, Lord Curzon wrote that "I earnestly hope and believe that the risk of our coming into conflict with the Angora Turks is getting less" and added that the Turks were seemingly becoming more aware of the ideological contradictions between Bolshevism and Islam.<sup>61</sup>

By 1922, both Turkey and Afghanistan were experiencing diplomatic tension with Russia. It became increasingly clear that rather than seriously courting the communist revolution, they were following an age-old tactic of states on the borders of two empires; both the government in Kabul and the government in Ankara seemed to be playing off the British and Bolshevik blocs against one another, in order to maximize their own political autonomy and leverage. This tactic proved effective: because of British anxiety about Kabul, Ankara, and Bolshevism, British officials hurried to placate the Turks and Afghans whenever possible.

In 1919, following the Treaty of Rawalpindi, Amanullah Khan, Emir of Afghanistan, wrote a letter to King George V, King-Emperor of the British Empire, imploring the latter to respect and defend the Muslim Holy Places and the Khalifate.<sup>62</sup> This relatively innocuous correspondence held great significance

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58 Watt, Series A, Volume II, Document 381.

59 Ibid. Document 386.

60 United Kingdom. A Monthly Review of Revolutionary Movements in British Dominions Overseas and Foreign Countries. Cabinet Papers, CAB 24/126 (CP 3168). 495.

61 Curzon, George. Letter to the Viceroy, 16 July 1921. Cabinet Papers, CAB 24/126 (CP 3563). 641.

62 Watt, Series B, Volume II, Document 42.

in the context of Anglo-Afghan hostility, British control of the Turkish Sultan-Khalif at Constantinople, and the Bolshevik consular presence in Afghanistan. The Government of India leapt at this chance to co-opt Afghan opinion away from the Bolsheviks. A report on Central Asia in 1919 recommended bringing an Afghan delegation to London to discuss the issue of the Khalifate, if only to disrupt Afghan-Soviet relations. Later that year, Lord Chelmsford, the Viceroy of India, wrote to Edwin Montagu, the Secretary of State for India, endorsing the idea. Chelmsford wrote that Amanullah Khan claimed to represent Afghanistan as well as the independent city-states of Khiva, Bokhara, and Ferghana in asking to send a deputation to London on behalf of the Khalif and Holy Places. Chelmsford recommended accepting the Emir's offer in order to lay the groundwork for future friendly relations, but more specifically, in order to drive a wedge between the Afghans and the Bolsheviks.<sup>63</sup>

Later, in 1920 and 1921, internal conflict threatened to rupture the Afghan-Soviet alliance. The Government of India was able to open its own negotiations with the Afghans, and the Viceroy proved eager to win them away from the Bolsheviks. On the subject of Afghan-Indian tension, he wrote that

We consider it essential that nothing shall be published of which Bolsheviks might take advantage in their negotiations with Afghanistan. They appear to be now exceedingly suspicious of Afghan intention to desert to our side, and too much plain speaking in public regarding our complaints against Afghanistan and restricted purpose of approaching conference might undeceive them and arrest development of friction between them and Afghans.<sup>64</sup>

Attempts to wrangle the Afghans away from Russia even influenced major strategy decisions in Central Asia. General Malleon, whose exposed forward position in northern Persia was the bulwark of British power in Central Asia, wrote to Simla proposing consolidation of troops and a withdrawal from exposed Mashhad to safer locations. In the Secretary of State's response to the Viceroy, he insisted on

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63 Ibid Document 252, 273.

64 Chelmsford. CAB 24/101 (CP 959). 291.

Malleeson's forces standing their ground, in large part because "Evidence from all sources seems to indicate that if existing situation can be maintained a little longer Bolshevick Afghan relations are likely to be strained to breaking-point."<sup>65</sup> Even as they struggled to find terms that the Emir's government would accept, however, the British officials in Central Asia began to suspect that the Afghans were bluffing.

E. W. Birse suspected as early as 1919 that the Afghans were playing a double game with Moscow, making friendly noises while at the same time making alliances with Central Asian states like Bokhara, Khiva, and Ferghana to oppose the Bolsheviks.<sup>66</sup> By early 1920, others in the British administration were echoing his suspicions. The Viceroy wrote of his negotiations with the Emir that Amanullah Khan "will try up until the last minute to bluff us with the bogies of a Bolshevist alliance and tribal unrest."<sup>67</sup>

The Turks were in even greater need of bargaining chips to use in negotiations with the Allies. The 1919 Treaty of Sevres, concluded by the Central Government in Constantinople and the Allied powers, stripped Turkey of several of its empire and several of its traditional national possessions. Mustapha Kemal and his Nationalist Party refused to accept the Treaty, and in 1919 the Greco-Turkish War broke out in southern Anatolia between Greek forces and Nationalist troops.

In the context of this international tension, Kemal's diplomacy towards the Bolsheviks could be interpreted as a ploy designed to coax concessions out of the Allies, and indeed, Allied concerns about Turkish-Bolshevik coordination did drive many British personnel to urge a quick peace with Turkey. Sir H. Rumbold's report in May 1920 relayed the claim by the Ottoman Sultan that the Bolsheviks posed a severe threat to Turkey. The Sultan said that it was his desire to "throw the Bolsheviks back on to the Caucasus", but that "to do this it is necessary to arrive at a basis of settlement which would satisfy

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65 Montagu, Edwin Samuel. CAB 24/104 (CP 1200). 474.

66 Watt. Series A, Volume II, Document 27.

67 Chelmsford. CAB 24/101 (CP 984). 374.

people sufficiently to enable peaceable men to settle down.” The Sultan concluded that “while the Greeks remain at Smyrna and Thrace it is impossible that Turkey’s wounds shall be healed.”<sup>68</sup>

In Turkey as in Afghanistan, the British responded to seemingly successful Russian diplomacy with renewed attempts to meet Nationalist demands. Commander Luke recommended “The adoption by the Conference, in drawing up a Turkish Peace Treaty, of the principle that no predominantly Ottoman districts are to be placed under Greek rule” as the best way to prevent Bolshevism from co-opting international Islamic opinion. His Foreign Office counterpart, A. Ryan, agreed, adding his doubts as to whether “any public pronouncement of friendship for Muslims . . . would weight much against the complete destruction of Turkey by depriving her not only of her outlying provinces but also of Constantinople and Smyrna.”<sup>69</sup> A letter recorded by the Foreign Office from General Haddad in 1920 discussed the benefits if the Turks “could form a friendly barrier against the Bolsheviks, rather than remaining our joint enemy.”<sup>70</sup> J.M. de Robeck, the British High Commissioner in Constantinople, was critical of the Turkish peace settlement arrived at in Sevres, arguing that the giving of Turkish provinces to Greece “will drive the remaining Turks into the arms of the Bolsheviks, will set the Near East and Central Asia aflame, and will intensify the menace of Bolshevism to the British Moslem world.”<sup>71</sup> In this context it is unsurprising that at Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1922 and 1923, Lord Curzon negotiated a treaty with Ankara that was much more agreeable to the Turks, and excluded the ceding of Turkish home provinces to Greece.<sup>72</sup> Lord Curzon addressed the Cabinet with regards to Lausanne in 1922, saying that “he would like to reobtain the friendship of Turkey in large part to bring about a break between Turkey and her Soviet Allies.”<sup>73</sup> The expulsion of Greek forces from Anatolia by the Nationalists in 1922 provided

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68 Watt. Series B, Volume II, Document 193.

69 Ibid. Document 18.

70 Watt, Series B, Volume II, Document 1.

71 Robeck, J.M. Letter to Lord Curzon of Kedleston. Cabinet Papers, CAB 24/101 (CP 967). 322.

72 Fromkin 559.

73 Curzon, George. Summary of Address to Cabinet, 1 November 1922. Cabinet Papers, CAB 23/32. 20.

the Turks with a strong bargaining position to begin with, and Allied fear of Bolshevik intrigues gave Ankara's diplomats even more fodder.

However, eventually, as with the case of Afghanistan, the British began to suspect that they were being bluffed. In Constantinople, Sir H. Rumbold reported the Grand Vizier's insistence that Nationalists at Ankara were merely "attempting to frighten the Allies" using the "Bolshevik bogey."<sup>74</sup> Rumbold said of the Bolsheviks in March 1921 that "The Angora leaders are still playing with them."<sup>75</sup> A. Ryan, speaking of Kemal's faction several months later, reported that "They dislike Bolshevism and mistrust Bolsheviks, but they stand by the Bolshevik Alliance in order to frighten the Allies with a spectre of an extremism more extreme, and above all more Boloesque (*sic*) than their own."<sup>76</sup> Mr. Rattigan, in the same report that featured Ryan's above comments, added that "The Kemalists, however, are believed to be ready to drop the Bolsheviks if they can obtain satisfaction from the Entente."<sup>77</sup> In general, this realization and the stabilization of British relations with the Soviet Union itself had, by 1922, ended the alleged Bolshevik-Nationalist-Afghan intrigues as a source of imperial crisis.

The realities of the Turco-Afghan Treaty and the plan relating to it provide at best a partial explanation for the treatment of Bolshevism by the thinkers and planners of the British government. Leaders in today's international community might have called Turkey and Afghanistan "rogue states", but British paranoia about Bolshevism extended into the heart of the Empire itself. The British handling of the Bolshevik threat in their own sphere of influence poses an entirely different question, one relating less to diplomatic intrigues and more to the expediencies of empire. The answer is a complex one, and provides an excellent example of how an irrational apparatus of hegemonic rule can work unconsciously, subconsciously, and sometimes even self-consciously, to perpetuate its own existence.

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74 Watt, Series B, Volume II, Document 255.

75 Ibid. Document 123.

76 Ibid. Document 197.

77 Ibid. Document 196.

### **Chapter 3: The Strategic Threat of Bolshevism on the Borders of Empire**

Let us return to 1919, when the borders of the British Empire were far from clear. War still continued in many parts of the empire, and many of Britain's new domains, as we've seen above, were not clearly understood. Turkey had theoretically surrendered to the Allies, and British troops held the Sultan in Constantinople. However, Turkish forces under the leadership of both the old Committee for Union and Progress and Mustapha Kemal's Nationalist faction continued to resist Allied forces. To confuse matters further, states like Persia and later, Iraq, were theoretically independent and autonomous, but were often directed by British agendas. In these regions, while the British knew that the strength of Islam prevented Bolshevism from becoming a dominant political ideology, they

nonetheless recognized the strategic threat posed by the Bolshevik bloc to the north. As Sir H. Rumbold wrote in a letter to Curzon, “Moslem Turks could have nothing to do with Bolshevism, for it is incompatible with their religion, but if it were imposed on them by force, what then?”<sup>78</sup> It would eventually become apparent that Bolshevik military expansion would go no further than the traditional borders of the Russian Empire, but from 1919 to 1922, it looked to Britain and the rest of the world as though the Bolsheviks were prepared to invade all of Central Asia. The Bolshevik threat that proved so ephemeral in years to come was the dominant feature of political and strategic thinking in these areas from 1918-1921.

Ninety years later, it is difficult to gauge just how realistic of a strategic threat the Bolsheviks posed to the borders of the British sphere of influence in the Islamic world. While a Russian invasion of India was almost certainly a logistical impossibility, the borderlands of Persia and British-supported Transcaucasia were quite possibly within Moscow’s reach; some were even concerned that if Transcaucasia fell, an invasion of Arab Mesopotamia may follow.

The Bolsheviks were clear about their goals. In 1920 the Home Office circulated a quote from one of Lenin’s speeches in which he named England as the Bolsheviks’ “greatest enemy in the world” and declared it a goal of the Bolsheviks to “root out the imperialist spirit in Persia, India, and Asia generally.”<sup>79</sup> In early 1920, the Foreign Office received an intercept from agents in the Middle East of a Soviet cypher supposedly on its way from Moscow to Tashkent, the Soviet capital of Turkestan. This message supposedly reported that “Two divisions of picked troops are being sent to Turkestan, and on their arrival not less than a half a million Mohammedans under training should be mobilized, of which part will be sent to Russia but the majority through Bokhara and Persia against the British.”<sup>80</sup>

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78 Ibid. Document 123.

79 United Kingdom Directorate of Intelligence. Special Report, No. 17, June 1920: Notes on the Present Political Situation in Central Asia. Cabinet Papers, CAB 24/108 (CP 1585). 363.

80 Watt, Series A, Volume II, Document 338.

The Soviet landing in northwest Persia at Enzeli drove home the military threat to Persia. A Directorate of Intelligence report from June 1920 pointed out that “It is clear that the proved ability of the Bolsheviks to land a military force in the former country [Persia] from the Caspian Sea, combined with the complete control which they now exercise in Transcaspia, constitutes a serious menace to British influence in Persia.”<sup>81</sup> The British military intelligence apparatus, as we have seen, was far from reliable. However, the fact remains that the British leaders in 1919 and 1920 had significant evidence pointing to the real and present danger of Bolshevik invasion in the borderlands.

When we examine the documents of the British personnel who dealt with the military threat to the borders of empire, it becomes obvious that there was a huge disparity between the imperial vision of the agents on the ground and the imperial vision of government leaders in India and London. Representatives of His Majesty in Transcaucasia, Persia, and Iraq, all continually petitioned the British government for extensive material support and guarantees of military protection should their particular area of operations come under attack by the Bolsheviks. The letters and reports of these men on the front carry the tone of an empire still at war, in which strong support for sympathetic allies and tenacious imperial defense are to be considered priorities. To each agent on the ground, their own theatre, be it Khorasan, Georgia, or the Caspian, seemed crucial to the defense of the Empire as a whole. Perhaps more importantly, each agent on the ground was concerned with representing British interests within a foreign government, and they knew that every soldier and every pound sterling London sent them would increase their power and influence in their theatre of operations and would give them bargaining chips to use in negotiations with local leaders.

British leaders in London were approaching the situation from an entirely different direction. For men like Balfour, Lloyd George, and Lord Milner, wartime was coming to an end and hard military solutions were the methodology of the past. These men were the ones who, after dispatching a division

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81 Special Report, No. 17, June 1920: Notes on the Present Political Situation in Central Asia. 329.

to the Caucasus, had to explain to the public why British soldiery was fighting in Georgia to defend Persian cities from a Russian incursion. In conference rooms in India and London, reducing expenditures and eliminating imperial commitments became the order of the day. For these men, the goal of a British presence in Persia and Transcaucasia could not be to oppose the Bolsheviks militarily, a goal which was quickly tossed out as unfeasible, but rather to ensure, in the presence of a Bolshevik military threat, that local governments and leaders receive strict guidance from British policy advisors and maintained an appropriate respect for British interests.

In the first days after World War I, while the Paris Peace Conference was still under way, the threat of Red invasion hung most ominously over Transcaucasia. The three Caucasian states of Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia had traditionally been a region of imperial rivalry and suppressed national ambitions, where the Ottoman and Russian Empires had fought for control of the economically critical Black Sea. The region was demographically diverse, containing Christians and Muslims, as well as people who identified with different nationalities; Georgians, Armenians, and Azerbaijanis, but also Turks, Russians, and Kurds all made their homes in the region. When the tsar's empire collapsed, the peoples of Transcaucasia hurriedly formed their own governments and tried to establish sovereign states. Initially, these fledgling nations' greatest concern was Turkey, immediately to the west.<sup>82</sup> However, as the Russian Civil War dragged on and the conflict between General Denikin and the Bolsheviks drew closer and closer to the Georgian frontier, both the local governments and the British began to fear a Bolshevik incursion in the region as well.

Sir Oliver Wardrop, the Foreign Office agent tasked with representing the British Crown in Transcaucasia, wrote to Curzon in the spring of 1919, claiming that "Whatever may happen to Russia, I venture to take the view that the independence of Transcaucasia . . . Is a British interest of prime importance for the sake of India and Persia."<sup>83</sup> A report on the military situation in Russia in January 1920

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82 Pipes 101-104.

83 Wardrop 67.

described the Bolsheviks' southward advance and warned that "Their advent in Caucasia would be as grave a menace to North-Western Persia as their presence in Turkestan is to its north-eastern provinces."<sup>84</sup> J.Y. Simpson, after a conversation with Colonel Stokes, a military intelligence officer working with Major General Dunsterville in Transcaucasia, reported the Colonel's misgivings about the British evacuation of Transcaucasia "whose consequences for us are apparently not fully realised." The colonel went on to describe how a failure to hold onto the Caucasus would greatly increase "the difficulty of maintaining our position in Mesopotamia, Persia, and India."<sup>85</sup> To read the reports from agents on the ground, one would think the Caucasus was the linchpin of British imperial defense.

It is true that the British were not entirely without a military presence in Transcaucasia. In 1918, when tsarist troops collapsed and withdrew from Persia and Transcaucasia, Major General L.C. Dunsterville was dispatched from India with a small force of officers and NCOs riding in forty-one armoured cars and vans to, in his own words "reorganize the broken units of the Russian, Georgian, and Armenian soldiery and restore the battle-line against the Turkish invasion."<sup>86</sup> However, as a forward defensive position, the Caucasus left much to be desired. British troops sent to the Caucasus would have hostile Turkish Nationalists to their southwest and to their east the Caspian Sea, which was in ever-increasing danger of falling under Bolshevik control.<sup>87</sup> While close to Britain's enemies, the Caucasus was far from imperial power centers, causing General Dunsterville to lament that because "Baghdad to Baku is 800 miles it was impossible to send sufficient troops to meet the situation."<sup>88</sup> Moreover, the locals were fairly divided and Major McDonnell reported a "feeling of distrust" towards the British in a population which assumed that the imperialist British had "come to stay in one form or another."<sup>89</sup>

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84 United Kingdom. Summary of the Military Situation in All Parts of Russia at the End of January 1920. Watt, Series A, Volume II, Document 378.

85 Simpson, J.Y. Minute of Conversation with Colonel Stokes. *Confidential Print: The Middle East 1839-1969*. London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1922. Marlborough: Adam Matthew Publications. FO 406/42: Eastern Affairs, Further Correspondence, Part III. 41.

86 Dunsterville, Major General L. C. *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*. London: Edward Arnold, 1920. 3, 16.

87 Summary of Military Situation in All Parts of Russia at the End of January 1920.

88 Dunsterville 2.

89 McDonnell 17.

This perhaps explains why Dunsterville's mission did not always receive enthusiastic cooperation from all Transcaucasians; many in the region did not see why they should help the British while resisting all other foreigners. However, here General Dunsterville's reaction his lukewarm reception sets a trend that we will see repeated again and again in the interwar Middle East. Rather than accept that the British presence in Transcaucasia was at all unwelcome, Dunsterville assumed that the Russian Revolution was the source of his problems. He said bitterly that "The revolution had so taken the heart out of these men that this primitive spirit of the defense of hearth and home, one of the strongest instincts the human being possesses, was entirely absent in the case of the South Caucasus."<sup>90</sup> One way or another, a lack of reliable cooperation from local governments and dangerous geostrategic positioning both made a military defense of the Caucasus a grim prospect, which would most likely require vast military expenditures if the Bolsheviks were to actually invade.

Nonetheless, there were those in the Cabinet who supported Wardrop and Stokes in their bid for a Transcaucasian front. The debate about defending Transcaucasia broke down into several different arguments. Lord Curzon was adamant that the British help to defend the Caucasian states partially due to concerns of imperial defense but partially due to Britain's commitment to "prevent disorder in the Caucasus and give a chance to the autonomous states that were struggling into existence."<sup>91</sup> From 1918 through 1920, Curzon remained outspoken in his belief that, if nothing else, Britain's obligation to defend fledgling nations demanded a British presence in the Caucasus.

Lord Curzon was by and large alone in his concern for the sovereignty of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. For most of the Cabinet, the Caucasus was valuable solely as a means of defending India. Here, too, the Foreign Office was vociferous that if the British abandoned the Caucasus, they might see their entire Asian empire crumble before their eyes:

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90 Dunsterville 4.

91 United Kingdom. Minutes of a Meeting of the Imperial War Cabinet, 12 December 1918. Cabinet Papers, CAB 23/42. 61.

First, Armenia would go . . . Then Georgia and the Azerbaijan would go. Third, the Caspian would be lost. Fourth, Enzeli would fall to the Bolsheviks, and this would be followed by the loss of North Persia, against which the Bolsheviks had designs. The Shah of Persia would then disappear, and North Khorasan would be occupied by the Bolsheviks. All this would stir the Afghans to their vitals, and the position would become very serious. A wave would be set in motion that would not stop until it laved the mountain barriers of India.<sup>92</sup>

This domino thinking captured the imagination of most of the British Cabinet, and proved the single greatest factor motivating a defense of the Caucasus throughout the debate.<sup>93</sup>

A small group of more experienced Cabinet members, however, remained highly skeptical of the prospects for a Bolshevik advance on India. In a moment of clear-headed pragmatism that has stood the test of time, the Prime Minister pointed out that in rugged Central Asia “without good communications and without munitions factories, it was absurd to talk of [the Bolsheviks] undertaking an expedition against India, which we had always regarded as a very serious matter for the Russian Empire when at its strongest.” Lord Balfour shared this skepticism. As an old hand in British Middle Eastern policy, he was able to state pointedly and sardonically that “Every time I come to a discussion, at intervals of, say, five years, I find there is a new sphere we have to guard, which is supposed to protect the gateways of India. Those gateways are getting further and further from India.”<sup>94</sup> Edwin Montagu, the Secretary of State for India, knew that it would likely be Indian troops dispatched to the Caucasus, and he shared Balfour and Lloyd George’s misgivings, stating that “On the grounds of protection for India, he was not ready to

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92 United Kingdom. Notes of a Cabinet Conference, 18 January 1920. Cabinet Papers, CAB 23/35. 131.

93 Notes of a Cabinet Conference, 18 January 1920. 102. See also Minutes of a Meeting of the Imperial War Cabinet, 23 December, 1918. 76.

94 Neilson, Keith, and Greg Kennedy, eds. *Far-Flung Lines: Studies in Imperial Defense in Honor of Donald Mackenzie Shurman*. London and Portland: Frank Cass, 1996. 117. Also Fromkin p. 376.

believe any expenditure of Indian money was justified.”<sup>95</sup> Historians have demonstrated in hindsight that these three were absolutely correct; the danger to India was virtually nonexistent.

For David Lloyd George and Winston Churchill, the fight in the Caucasus represented a whole different agenda. These men were in a struggle against Bolshevism on all fronts, and the need to contain what seemed like a tide of Bolshevik agitation sweeping the world often outweighed more levelheaded policy influences. This paranoia often reached obsessive levels, and made itself felt in every sphere of British policy.<sup>96</sup> Winston Churchill was against diverting resources to the fight in the Caucasus because he thought that all five Allies should have been intervening in Russia itself. Churchill was ever-vocal in his calls to “in the name of order, to interfere and do it thoroughly.”<sup>97</sup> Lloyd George was less confident about British intervention in Russia, but he tended to agree with Churchill about the nature of the conflict; he affirmed in a Cabinet meeting that “he himself was not the least bit afraid of an attack by the Bolsheviks on Mesopotamia or India”, but that “the real importance was to establish a barrier against the Bolsheviks.”<sup>98</sup> For his part, Churchill responded to concerns for the safety of India by advocating that the best way to defend against an attack towards India was to launch a counterattack into Russia from Finland or Poland.<sup>99</sup>

In the end, the debate about the defense of Transcaucasia was, as Fromkin tells us, “settled by the War Office”, who ruled decisively that they did not have the strength to hold onto all of Central Asia even if the government wanted to.<sup>100</sup> The War Office had been engaged in its own debate, which was in many ways a more pragmatic reflection of the Cabinet discussion outlined above. Three defensive lines were seriously considered. The first ran through Constantinople, Batumi and Baku in the Caucasus, and

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95 United Kingdom. Minutes of a Meeting of the Imperial War Cabinet, 23 December, 1918. Cabinet Papers, CAB 23/42. 75.

96 Kent, Susan Kingsley. *Aftershocks: Politics and Trauma in Britain, 1918-1931*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 42, 57, 120.

97 Minutes of a Meeting of the Imperial War Cabinet, 23 December, 1918. 73.

98 Notes of a Cabinet Conference, 18 January 1920. 130.

99 Notes of a Cabinet Conference, 18 January 1920. 103.

100 Fromkin 472.

on to Kraznovodsk and Merv in Turkestan; this line would have required actively combatting Bolshevik armies in both Transcaucasia and Transcaspia. A second line, running from Constantinople to Batumi, Baku, Enzeli, Tehran, and Mashhad in North Persia, conceded to abandoning Transcaspia but maintained a British defense of the Caucasus. The third line, the most conservative of the three and the one the Cabinet would eventually settle on, proposed a withdrawal to the Hashemite kingdoms and Persia. This North Palestine-Mosul-Khanikin-Mashhad line abandoned all of Turkey, the Caucasus, and Transcaspia, and even allowed for the retreat of British forces from Mashhad to Birjand if necessary, effectively leaving northern Persia open. The War Office considered holding one of the two forward lines, but this would have required significant air support, and the Air Ministry claimed its machines were needed in Cairo and India.<sup>101</sup>

Even without Air Ministry back-up, Lord Curzon insisted that “something ought to be done and that the soldiers and sailors ought to discover some way out.” However, Admiral Beatty, the First Sea Lord, was adamant that the navy could only deploy in the Caspian in defense of the Caucasus if ground forces could secure their lines of communication and supply through the Caucasus back to the Black Sea. Early estimates called for upwards of two or three divisions for the task, and Chief of the Imperial General Staff Sir Henry Wilson stated without qualification that “the troops did not exist.”<sup>102</sup>

The long and complex debates about the defense of the Caucasus and the Caspian proved anticlimactic. The War Office put its foot down, and no troops were sent. When Bolshevik armies advanced on the Caucasus, Dunsterville’s force was compelled to withdraw. The Caucasian states would eventually come under Bolshevik control, and would remain part of the Soviet sphere of influence until 1989. However, these deliberations give us some interesting insights into the minds of British officials and administrators. The debate serves as an illustration of the anxiety surrounding the defense of India,

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101 War Office. Report on the Military Situation in Central Asia. *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*. Series A, Volume II, Document 41. See also Conclusions of a Cabinet Conference, 16 January 1920. 86.

102 Notes of a Cabinet Conference, 18 January 1920. 132.

an anxiety that permeated all levels of the British hierarchy. It illustrates the grim worldview of Lloyd George and Churchill, men living in a world under siege by Bolshevik insurrection. Perhaps most interestingly for our purposes, it shows how men like Wardrop, Stokes, and Curzon became so invested in their Caucasian project that, in the face of military logic and political pressure, they advocated sending British armies to a far-flung corner of the Russian Empire even as the most massive and horrific conflict in Britain's history was drawing to a close.

To Lord Curzon, it seemed that the British Empire simply walked out and abandoned the democratic governments of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. However, no matter how dire the military-financial situation, the British government proved unwilling to affect the same withdrawal from the vital Kingdom of Persia.

In a conflict between Britain and Russia over India and Muslim Asia, Persia occupied the position of greatest geostrategic significance, at the nexus of the two empires and the Muslim states they wished to rule. The Qajar dynasty of shahs performed a balancing act between Russian and British spheres of influence that dated back to the Victorian era, when Persia was informally separated into a portion recognizing Russian hegemony and a portion recognizing British hegemony. The Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 officially divided Persia into a Russian claim centered around control of Persia's resources, a neutral central section under the nominally independent authority of the shah, and a British territory associated primarily with the defense of the road to India. Thus, the Persian state was a client kingdom of not one, but two empires.<sup>103</sup>

The First World War and the Russian Revolution of 1917 shattered this status quo. From virtually the very beginning of the war, Turkish and Russian forces had conducted campaigns against one another across north-western Persia; the shah proved unable to maintain Persian neutrality and by 1916, Persia was a battle ground contested by Turkish, Russian, and Indian troops.<sup>104</sup> The Russian Revolution brought

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103 Fromkin 33, 149, Ullman 303.

104 Dunsterville 10, 16. See also Fromkin 209.

about an end to the formal, organized Russian presence in Persia, much to the consternation of the British. The British had been counting on the Russians to hold their northern flank in Persia and Mesopotamia; Major General Dunsterville was extremely unhappy about the Bolshevik withdrawal, which in his words created very suddenly “a gap of some 450 miles would be left open on the right flank of the British Mesopotamian army, through which Turkish and German agents and troops could flood Central Asia unopposed.”<sup>105</sup>

Interestingly, this brings us full circle to the chief British grievance against the Bolsheviks: their unwillingness to continue the war against the Central Powers. The Bolsheviks were initially extremely vocal about withdrawing the tsar’s forces from Persia. David Fromkin describes how Leon Trotsky renounced the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 as an imperialist scheme, and “Disclaiming responsibility for any anti-Bolshevik Russian troops remaining on Persian soil, he expressed the hope that the other foreign armies occupying Persian soil—the Turks and the British—would withdraw as well.”<sup>106</sup> Ironically for Trotsky, Russian withdrawal necessitated British action, and so the Government of India dispatched various forces to the Russian and independent portions of Persia, with the goal of maintaining stability and protecting British interests. Mohammed Gholi Majd points out that this effectively constituted an invasion of neutral Persia by the British in 1918.<sup>107</sup>

By the end of the war in 1919, the political balance of the region had been entirely altered, but the geostrategic value of Persia had only increased. Now, to its southwest were the new-made British mandates and protectorates of Iraq, Arabia, and Palestine. To its southeast lay turbulent Afghanistan and the crown jewel itself, British India. To the northwest Turkey was in turmoil, and to the north and northeast sat Bolshevik Transcaucasia and Turkestan and the borders of the old Russian Empire which represented the forefront of the communist advance into Asia.

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105 Ibid.

106 Fromkin 353.

107 Majd 20, 21. Also, for details of wartime operations in Persia see United Kingdom Imperial War Office. *Operations in Persia, 1914-1918*. Her Majesty’s Stationary Office: London, 1987.

The voice of the Foreign Office in Tehran in 1918 and 1919 was Sir Percy Cox, a famous friend of Gertrude Bell and a veteran of British service in the Middle East. Cox had served in the region for decades, most recently as the Chief Political Officer associated with the Government of India's invasion of Ottoman Mesopotamia. At the close of World War I, he was the Government of India's Acting Minister to Tehran. Cox displayed considerable political acumen throughout his tenure; Bell described him as "most charming, well-read, and interesting, and a really considerable politician"<sup>108</sup>, while the historian Toby Dodge has recognized Cox as "one of the most experienced colonial civil servants of his generation" and one of the "chief troubleshooters for the British Government in the Middle East during these turbulent years."<sup>109</sup> At the height of the chaos, in 1919, Cox was one of many agents across the Middle East who turned their eyes north, to where the Bolshevik advance out of Russia was picking up steam, and began immediately writing home, requesting more funding, more assurances for the local government, and above all, more military support.<sup>110</sup> However, Cox was an old hand who knew perhaps better than Wardrop how to assert himself and his interests, and his Tehran correspondence with Lord Curzon, himself new to the position of Foreign Secretary, provides some interesting reading.

At the time, the prime theatre for a showdown between Britain and Bolshevism seemed to be Transcaucasia; Cox, however, attempted to convince Curzon that the fall of Transcaucasia was inevitable, and therefore (to no one's surprise) the prime theatre of British resistance should be Cox's own station in Persia. Here again we see the ephemeral threat of Bolshevik propaganda employed to full effect. Cox argued that the defeat of British forces and their Caucasian proxies at the Caspian port of Krasnovodsk "will give great impetus to Bolshevik propaganda against Persia and ourselves and to penetration of Bolshevik parties into Persia through Caspian ports and the consequent defection of Turcos."<sup>111</sup> Cox concluded that the British should not support a lost cause and should focus on the defense of Persia

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108 Bell, Gertrude, and Elizabeth Burgoyne, ed.. *Gertrude Bell: From Her Personal Papers, 1914-1926*. London: Ernest Ben Limited, 1961. 37.

109 Dodge 13.

110 Watt, Series A: Volume II, Documents 30-33, 41, 50.

111 Watt, Series A: Volume II, Document 106.

itself. He wrote to India that “while H.M. Government and especially the Government of India desired to avoid large commitments” it was necessary to take on a more significant role in order to maintain stability and prevent the spread of Bolshevism. He wrote that because Persia’s “inability to govern herself and had resulted in a perpetual state of chaos and famine with a danger of Bolshevism, it was necessary for the interests of humanity and civilization for some competent power to take her in hand.”<sup>112</sup>

Let us take a moment to examine the number of different agents writing to the British Government in 1919, each apparently convinced that their particular theatre was the most critical front to defend from the Bolsheviks. The term “agency capture” tends to spring to mind in the course of such an examination. “Agency capture” was originally used to discuss the domestic political relationship between a commercial industry and the government agency responsible for regulating it. In this context, an agency becomes “captured” by its subject industry when it becomes more sympathetic to the views and priorities of its subject than the views and priorities of the political constituency on whose behalf it seeks to regulate. Administrators who become familiar with the ins and outs of the industry and with the logic of the existing status quo often find that, rather than representing the interests of the government in a particular sphere of the economy, they are representing their industry’s interests in the halls of government.<sup>113</sup> This term is used informally in a much broader context to describe agencies that work to expand and further an agenda that they are designed to oversee and control. It is useful to us today because it describes what occurred in the British administration of Transcaucasia and Persia in the early interwar period very accurately.

The agents dispatched to these regions in the closing days of the First World War were directed to strengthen the pro-British elements in the local government, maintain stability, and represent British

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112 *Operations in Persia, 1914-1918*. 463.

113 Laffont, Jean-Jacques, and Jean Tirole. “The Politics of Government Decision-Making: A Theory of Regulatory Capture.” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 106, no. 4 (Nov. 1991).

interests within the country at large. Priya Satia describes how throughout the Edwardian period, political officers had combined the duties of intelligence agent, policy advisor, and special administrator into a role that proved effective at quietly and unobtrusively projecting British power into obscure and/or politically sensitive parts of the globe. However, Satia also describes how these agent-administrators often proved unruly in the field, and pursued agendas of their own at London's expense.<sup>114</sup> Thus, Cox, Wardrop, and even at times Curzon, men who were supposed to be reducing demands on the British Treasury and smoothing British administration in their respective areas of operation, became increasingly convinced of the vital importance of their regions and sought to expand British activity there in a time of general military draw-down.

Earl Curzon, at least, wished to protect the Caucasus out of a sense of commitment to the governments there, governments who had altered their policies to comply with British desires. However, his and other Cabinet members' paranoia about India, Oliver Wardrop's seemingly irrational commitment to the defense of Caucasus, and Cox's similar inability to remain unbiased in his views on Persia indicate the degree to which they lost sight of their original goals. When the Government of India proved skeptical as to the importance of reinforcing Persia, Cox even inadvertently described this process of agency capture in his response to Simla: "Sir Percy Cox said that the views expressed by the Government of India were those he had held himself on his arrival in Tehran two months previously."<sup>115</sup> However, for the remainder of his tenure in Tehran, he would consistently oppose attempts by the British government to reduce their commitments in Persia.<sup>116</sup> Cox's successor, Herman Norman, seemed to fall into the same mindset. When the Government of India was advocating the dissolution of the South Persian Rifles, Mr. Norman lobbied on behalf of the Persian Prime Minister for them to be

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114 Satia 40-43.

115 *Operations in Persia, 1914-1918*. 464.

116 Cox, Percy. Letters to the Foreign Secretary. *British Documents on Foreign Affairs- reports and papers from the foreign office confidential print, Part II*. Series A, Volume II, Documents 50, 106, 275, 276, 290. See also Chelmsford, Frederic. Letter to the Secretary of State for India, 2 June 1920. Cabinet Papers, CAB 24/107 (CP 1405). 15.

maintained. When the British finally withdrew General Malleeson's force from Mashhad, Mr. Norman wrote to India, again on behalf of the Persian Prime Minister, complaining that "This withdrawal of this country's sole protection against the Bolsheviks has lately driven him to seek support of demagogues."<sup>117</sup>

In part, Cox, Wardrop and Norman were motivated by a desire for leverage over local governments. This form of imperial control was all about the perception of power; in order to appease discontented indigenous leaders, British administrators needed proof of the strength and good faith of the Empire. Thus, Cox's leverage in 1919 was largely dependent on Britain's promise of protection to Persia, first from the Turks, and later from the Bolsheviks. Cox was forced to write to Curzon asking him to contain the gossip of British ministers in London who were discussing a possible withdrawal from Persia, because it made Cox's job in Tehran harder.<sup>118</sup> Mr. Norman wrote in 1920, when the Persian government was engaged in reluctant negotiations with Moscow, that "we appear to have even less cause than before to complain of their action now that while we withdraw our own force we refuse to lend them means of creating one to take its place."<sup>119</sup> Mr. Norman made the legitimate point that while refusing to take responsibility for security and order, the Governments in London and India were essentially expecting these states to act as their colonial clients and accept assurances of British power and friendship,. Oliver Wardrop's position in the Caucasus was even more challenging, especially when it became increasingly apparent that no British support was coming. However, in their desperate scramble to maintain their posts within the Empire, these administrators, like General Dunsterville, refused to recognize that their presence was an unwelcome intrusion. When confronted by local hostility across the Middle East and Central Asia, they insisted that "Bitter anti-British propaganda is spreading everywhere, but nevertheless British rule would be welcomed by the whole population."<sup>120</sup> These were men serving

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117 Norman, Herman. Letter to the Foreign Secretary. *British Documents on Foreign Affairs- reports and papers from the foreign office confidential print, Part II. Series A, Volume III, Documents 90, 111.*

118 Cox, Percy. Letters to the Foreign Secretary. *British Documents on Foreign Affairs- reports and papers from the foreign office confidential print, Part II. Series A, Volume II, Documents 349-350.*

119 Norman, Herman. Document 65.

120 Malleeson, Wilfred. Memorandum on the Military Situation in Persia, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs- reports and papers from the foreign office confidential print, Part II. Series A, Volume II, Document 248.*

empire, for the sake of empire, without concern for the approval of the British public or the populations they ruled.

The concept of agency capture is a useful one when analyzing the actions of British administrators on the ground in the threatened border regions, and, like the behavior of Afghanistan and Turkey, helps to explain the causes of the British Red Scare in the Middle East. The other part of the problem was that, when it came right down to it, the British government in the years immediately following the war was largely unsure of how to handle the border regions. As we saw in Transcaucasia, the fate of the British project in Persia would be the subject of a great deal of debate at Simla, Whitehall, and Downing Street. The British leaders were caught in something of a paradox; they had no funding, troops, or public support with which to conduct a campaign in Persia against the Bolsheviks, but unlike Transcaucasia, they were unwilling to entirely let Persia leave their control. The policy that was arrived at by the British Empire in Asia had sweeping ramifications for Persia's future and reveals one of the principle ways that Bolshevism was used in the administration of the British Middle East.

The military situation in Persia was somewhat more tenable than the situation in the Caucasus. In 1919, a variety of military forces occupied Persia. The shah maintained a small police force around Tehran that had little military power. The South Persian Rifles were an Indian formation that had been operating in the British sphere of Persia since 1916; their primary objective was to uphold the status quo of the Anglo-Russian Convention. The Persian Cossacks were a largely indigenous Russian-led force stationed in the Russian sphere for the same reason; even after the Revolution, many remained in Persia with their units.<sup>121</sup> More recently, in 1918, Major General L.C. Dunsterville's small force of armoured cars in Transcaucasia had been tasked with plugging the gap left by the Bolshevik withdrawal, and they remained in northwest Persia even after the fall of Baku.<sup>122</sup> General Wilfred Malleon, an Indian Army Intelligence officer, was likewise dispatched in 1918 to Mashhad in northeastern Persia to guard against

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121 Fromkin 209.

122 Dunsterville 15-16.

Bolshevik and Turkish advances in Transcaspia; his detachment was designated the North Persian Force, or Norperforce.<sup>123</sup> A number of indigenous Persian tribes maintained significant military forces, but in general the British were the strongest force in most of Persia.<sup>124</sup>

Geographically, Persia also was significantly closer to British bases of power in Cairo and India, with full naval access in the Persian Gulf and nearby support in Baghdad. Thus, where Transcaucasia was surrounded by hostile territories and navies, in Persia the British had only to worry about the northern borders with Transcaspia and Transcaucasia and the threat of attack from Afghanistan.

Persia's close geographic positioning would have been helpful had the British had any troops to send. However, as the Bolsheviks solidified and increased their presence in Transcaspia, the General Staff was unable to find new troops to send to Persia to counter them. To make matters worse, the Persian Cossacks, still the largest force in Persia, were Russian-led and therefore widely distrusted and suspected of Bolshevik sympathies. In June 1920, General Haldane, the Commander of British forces in Mesopotamia, warned "that the advance of Bolshevik forces by Tabriz and Enzeli combined with a notable simultaneous coup by these Cossacks would be beyond the powers of any troops he can spare or maintain in Persia."<sup>125</sup>

The fall of Gilan to the Bolsheviks in 1920 left General Malleeson's Norperforce all but surrounded by elements the British considered suspect; the Afghans in the southeast, the Cossacks and Persian rebels to the southwest, and the Bolsheviks to the north. A series of correspondence between the Secretary of State for India and the Viceroy make clear the paradoxical situation in which Norperforce found itself by 1921. The Viceroy wrote suggesting the withdrawal of Norperforce on the grounds that it "could not resist serious Bolshevik attack" and a small force of military intelligence officers could do the job of maintaining a "bridge over Central Asia" just as well for much cheaper. Viceroy Chelmsford later

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123 Ullman 311, Fromkin 356.

124 Dunsterville 116, 127, Fromkin 209, Majd 22.

125 United Kingdom. Weekly Appreciation of Matters of Naval Interest for the Week Ending in June 26<sup>th</sup>, 1920. Cabinet Papers, CAB 24/108 (CP 1561). 227. See also Majd 53, 54.

affirmed to the Secretary of State for India that Malleeson's force was "unnecessary from a strictly military standpoint as it is incapable of resisting serious Bolshevik attack."<sup>126</sup> This begs the question of why exactly Malleeson was even present at Mashhad.

Despite this utter lack of confidence in the Mashhad position, the chaotic situation across Persia, and the panicked reports of people on the ground, the higher levels of the Lloyd George government seemed to acknowledge that Soviet armies posed a minimal military threat to Persia. Curzon wrote to Cox in 1919 that "Military opinion here [in London], however, is convinced that any attack in force by Bolsheviks against Persia is highly improbable and may be practically discounted." By 1920, Malleeson himself agreed with this assessment, stating that he thought the Bolsheviks in Turkestan were "far more frightened of us than we are of them." For their part, the Bolsheviks continually maintained their outward insistence that the troops in Turkestan were solely to defend Turkestan from British aggression.<sup>127</sup>

If the military threat of Bolshevik invasion could "be practically discounted" and if "Moslems were the natural barrier to the spread of Bolshevism in Asia," then a better explanation is needed to understand why the British kept Dunsterville, Malleeson, and other officers in such clearly exposed and committed positions. It turns out that while the defense against Bolshevism was the most commonly cited reason for a British presence in Persia, the British Government felt that it was important to project British power into Persia for a variety of different reasons, and as we've seen above, the threat of Red invasion did not make the list.

At the forefront of the debate, of course, was the familiar argument for the defense of India. All of the ministers who argued that Transcaucasia was necessary for the safety of the Raj insisted that Persia was doubly critical. Persia bordered India itself, and shared a huge border with Afghanistan, which

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<sup>126</sup> Montagu, Edwin, and Frederic Chelmsford. Memorandum Circulated by the Secretary of State for India. Cabinet

Papers, CAB 24/102 (CP 1200). 472.

<sup>127</sup> Malleeson, Wilfred. Report enclosed with a Letter from the Viceroy to the Secretary of State for India. Cabinet Papers, CAB 24/101 (CP 988). 399.

itself was in a very uncertain state. In the west, if Persia were to fall, then French Syria and the British mandates of Iraq and Palestine would be left dangerously exposed. Additionally, while Transcaucasia and Transcaspia were regions traditionally controlled by Russia, Persia, at least southern Persia on the Gulf, had for decades always fallen into a British sphere of influence. Sir Percy Cox, when writing nervously to Curzon, mentioned his concern for the thriving British community in Tehran, which would need to be evacuated in the event of a Bolshevik advance.<sup>128</sup> For these reasons arguments of imperial defense found more firm footing than they had in Transcaucasia.

However, in addition to “Indian concerns” and the other imperial factors at stake in Persia, the debate about central Asia brought a new motivation to the fore, one that would come to dominate naval thinking for the remainder of the century. In a Cabinet meeting in late 1920, Admiral Beatty, the First Sea Lord, pointed out what he called a “naval strategic question.” He described to the Cabinet how “During the last five years our command of fuel and particularly of coal, was one of the factors which had helped us to control the seas. This power was passing, owing to the fact that oil was rapidly taking the place of coal.” Lord Beatty’s discourse revealed that Britain controlled only 4% of the world’s oil supply, and that three-quarters of the Royal Navy ran on oil supplies controlled by foreign powers. He went on to say that “One of the problems of the Naval Staff has been to ascertain where oil was to be found which could be obtained without control by other Powers. Of these sources it was found that Persian oil was by far the most important.”<sup>129</sup> Admiral Beatty’s words would prove prophetic; Iran remains one of the world’s principle oil producers to this day.

The issue of oil had been broached before; other Cabinet ministers had mentioned it in connection with Central Asia and during the Caucasus debate the First Lord of the Admiralty, Walter Long, had said that “an even more important object [than defending India] was to hold the oil of Baku.

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128 Cox, Percy. Series A, Volume II, 290.

129 United Kingdom. Notes of a Cabinet Conference, 18 January 1920. Cabinet Papers, CAB 23/35. 95.

All the experts insisted on the Importance of this.”<sup>130</sup> However, in Persia the issue was more sensitive, and Admiral Beatty’s address to the Cabinet made its importance extremely clear.

For one reason or another, the British were unwilling to entirely quit Persia. The Eastern Committee was clearly motivated by a variety of imperial concerns unrelated to Bolshevism when it concluded with regards to Persia that “the guiding principle of future relations must be the permanent maintenance of British influence in a country bordering on India.”<sup>131</sup>

So the British did in fact have an interest in maintaining stability and imperial order in Persia, but the fight against Bolshevism was largely a façade. This suggests that in interwar Asia, imperial administration and intelligence machinery, sometimes subconsciously and sometimes consciously, created fictions that demanded the perpetuation of empire in the region. In the example of agency capture, British agents in the interwar Middle East tended to emphasize theoretical Bolshevik threats whenever these threats promised access to greater resources with which to pursue imperial ambitions. However, at a higher level, the British government produced fictions that they needed to cut costs and justify continued occupation of the region both to its indigenous peoples and to the British public at home.

In his piece for the *Historical Journal*, John Darwin describes how the interwar years were characterized not by imperial retreat and dissolution, but by a new imperial strategy that reduced the imperial sphere of influence in colonial societies in order to strengthen the British position. Darwin contends that the British removed themselves from certain spheres of society, at once deflating the claims and grievances of their most ardent opponents and also ridding themselves of expensive non-essential administrative functions.<sup>132</sup>

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130 Notes of a Cabinet Conference, 18 January 1920. 130. See also United Kingdom. Conclusions of a Cabinet Conference, 16 January 1920. Cabinet Papers, CAB 23/35. 82.

131 United Kingdom Imperial War Office. 382.

132 Darwin, John. “Imperialism in Decline? Tendencies in British Imperial Policy between the Wars.” *The Historical Journal*, 23, no. 3 (1980). Cambridge University Press. 678.

The aftermath of the First World War is often seen as a period of empire under siege, in which nationalist movements and local uprisings began to make real headway against imperial oppressors. Darwin rejects this notion as a model for the interwar British Empire. Instead, he argues that the British imperialists of the 1920s were determined to maintain their holdings in the long term, and were confident in their ability to do so. However, with the development of increasingly assertive and democratic civil society in the imperial periphery and, as Priya Satia points out, in the metropole also, came a new and more subtle form of empire that sought to “twist into ever new shapes to avert and avoid their gaze.”<sup>133</sup>

The true brilliance of this policy is that it simultaneously reduced the costs of imperial control, an essential element of interwar British administration. Darwin points out that many of the Raja’s concessions to Indian provincial governments were driven not only by nationalist agitation but also by “An increasingly complicated and expensive administrative apparatus and the strain of regulating ever-widening areas of social and economic life.”<sup>134</sup> Meanwhile, in her discussion of Iraq, Satia’s points out how a cheaper imperial control mechanism was more likely to go unnoticed by critical portions of the public: “Indeed, the purpose of cost-cutting, its framers acknowledged, was not only economy but imperial autonomy- freedom from fiscal accountability to the public . . . the techniques of covert empire were designed to evade both the Iraqi and British public.”<sup>135</sup>

While Priya Satia coined the term “covert empire” to describe specifically interwar British rule of Arabia and Mesopotamia, it is an excellent term to associate more generally with this new imperial role. Satia’s covert empire was “invisible, barely existing on paper, designed for an increasingly anti-imperialist postwar world.”<sup>136</sup> Most importantly, as Darwin illustrates, it was “designed to knock out the props which, so it appeared, had supported the upsurge of anti-British nationalism in the aftermath of the war.

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133 Satia 8.

134 Darwin 763.

135 Satia 288.

136 Ibid. 7.

By the same token, they were to equip British influence with a streamlined efficiency.”<sup>137</sup> Bolshevism as a shadow threat was invaluable in greasing the wheels of this transition; it served as a red herring, as a code-word for popular discontent and agitation, and as a consolation to any British personnel who may have had misgivings about the actions of the Empire.

We begin to see this policy trend emerge in Persia as early as 1919. In his responses to Cox’s demands, the Foreign Secretary Earl Curzon deflected requests for increased British commitment, while still requiring that the Persian government toe the British line in their relations with the Bolsheviks. While Curzon insisted that “any attack in force by Bolsheviks against Persia is highly improbable and may be practically discounted,” he also encouraged Cox to be firm in Persia, because “Real danger lies in infiltration of Bolshevik individual agents or small parties and the spread of insidious propaganda.” As Curzon well knew, the last thing the British needed in 1919 was to mount a major military expedition to Persia. While downplaying the threat of Bolshevik invasion, which could only be prevented through extreme expenditures, Curzon brings up the threat of Bolshevik propaganda; this much more ephemeral threat “could not be prevented, even by largely augmented forces”, but still demanded British oversight and control in the lives of Persian citizens.<sup>138</sup> In this context, the British supported Vossough-ed-Dowleh’s appointment to the position of Prime Minister in 1919. Vossough promptly concluded the Anglo-Persian Convention of 1919, an unequal treaty that gave Britain a free economic hand in Persia and due to its clear pro-British agenda, never received ratification by the Persian representative assemblies. However, it was a cheap and somewhat subtle way of stabilizing the Persian situation in Britain’s favor and guarding against the “infiltration of Bolshevik individual agents and small parties”.<sup>139</sup>

By 1920, however, three events conspired to turn the situation in Persia entirely against the British. In May of 1920, Bolshevik forces attacked Enzeli on the Caspian coast, seemingly in coordination

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137 Darwin 678.

138 Curzon, George. Letter to the Acting Minister, Tehran. *British Documents on Foreign Affairs- reports and papers from the foreign office confidential print, Part II*. D. Cameron Watt, ed. Frederick, Maryland: University Publications of America, 1984. Series A, Volume II, Document 378.

139 Majd 36-38.

with Persian revolutionaries under Kuchik Khan. Soon, the entire northwest province of Gilan was in revolt and had formed its own Bolshevik-influenced government. To make matters worse, the force opposing the Bolsheviks in northwest Persia was the Persian Cossacks. The British had long suspected the Cossacks, who though mainly Persian were officered by Russians and commanded by a Russian Colonel Starosselsky, of having Bolshevik sympathies. The Cossack defeats in Gilan in 1920 and 1921 did little to increase British confidence, and undercut the already exposed position at Mashhad. Increasingly, the minimal British forces that were in Persia were becoming a liability.

The troops were needed more than ever if British prestige were to be maintained. The Bolshevik advance on Gilan and the widespread public outcry against Britain's presence led to the fall of the Vossough-ed-Dowleh ministry in the summer of 1920, and the new administration was threatening to reject the Anglo-Persian Agreement of 1919. Calls for the dissolution of the South Persian Rifles and the withdrawal of the British presence increased across the country.<sup>140</sup> This second crisis drove home the need to maintain a low profile in the conduct of imperial business.

Thirdly, in July of 1920, Mesopotamia was in turmoil and more troops were needed to stabilize the Kingdom of Iraq. The British desperately searched for forces that could be sent, and came to the conclusion that Norperforce would have to be weakened and eventually withdrawn from Persia entirely.<sup>141</sup> With the departure of Norperforce delayed only by the melting of the snow, the moment of decision for the future of the British Empire in Persia was approaching.

A telegram from the Viceroy to the Secretary of State for India sheds a great deal of light on how the British grappled with their problems in Persia. The Viceroy wrote that "Persia will never accept the Anglo-Persian Agreement as it stands." He went on to report that the British had attempted to make Persian administration more "efficient" through "the infiltration of Persian administration by British

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140 Ibid. 48-53. See also Monroe, Elizabeth. *Britain's Moment in the Middle East: 1914-1971*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1981. 59.

141 United Kingdom. Summary of Situation in Mesopotamia. Cabinet Papers, CAB 24/109 (CP1646). 234.

officers." By 1920, "Persian nationalism, however, has proved too strong for Persia to accept this willingly, and we are unable to face military and financial commitments involved in forcing matters through." The Viceroy concluded that the best course of action would be to withdraw entirely from Persia, drop the Anglo-Persian Agreement, and appoint some sort of financial advisor to Tehran that could oversee British aid to Persia and ensure the "efficiency" of the Persian government; in other words, an advisor who could ensure the Persian government's protection of British interests. He described such an advisor as the only aid Persia is likely to accept from the British. In statements that underscore Darwin's description of the British Empire in the Middle East and Satia's concept of covert empire, Chelmsford claims that "Our own disappearance into the background will rob Bolshevism of her one valid excuse" and that the British should "reconcile ourselves, therefore, to a continuance of the inefficiency and corruption that are endemic in Persia, and simply try to avoid reproach, which also constitutes the greatest danger to ourselves." Perhaps his most revealing admission, however, is invaluable to this study because it underscores the role of Bolshevism in this new form of empire. Chelmsford wrote that "any policy involving direct financial or military assistance on our part must inevitably prevent growth of that nationalist spirit, which is, in the long run, our real defense against incursion of Bolshevism." Chelmsford subtly acknowledged what the myriad of British administrators continually avoided saying aloud; that Bolshevism was a red herring, and that the true problem for the British in the Middle East was a growing demand for national sovereignty and self-determination. He recognized that the way to get peace in the Middle East was not to defeat Bolshevism, but was to get out of the way of the growth of "nationalist spirit." In August, the month after the Viceroy's letter, General Edmund Ironside, a renowned soldier fresh from the North Russian Campaign, was appointed commander of Norperforce. He would leave behind a situation in Persia in which the new British Minister, Sir Percy Loraine, had influence over the essential British interests and in which the

Governments of the United Kingdom and India did not have to expend a sixpence to defend of Tehran. He would leave behind a situation very similar to the ideal situation described by the Viceroy.

Ironically, the key to Ironside's solution was the troublesome Persian Cossack Division. Less than a month after he was appointed, General Ironside discreetly dismissed the Russian officers of the Cossack unit. He must have surprised some observers when he refused to appoint British officers in their place, insisting on Persian officers as well as troops. Ironside toured the Persian Cossack Division shortly after his arrival and was immediately impressed with one colonel, a native Persian, named Reza Khan. Ironside reported his liking for Reza Khan and said shortly thereafter that "In fact, a military dictatorship would solve our troubles and let us out of the country without any trouble at all."

Ironside departed Persia abruptly that winter, after handing control of the Persian Cossacks to Reza Khan and laying the preparations for the departure of the British column. In February, Reza Khan led the Cossacks to the capital, entered, and took control of the Shah and the city. His self-appointment to the post of War Minister was temporary; his later assumption of the title of Shah after Shah Ahmed Quajar fled the country was permanent. John Caldwell, part of the American Legation in Tehran, said of the coup that "It is perfectly apparent that the whole movement is of British origin and support, in furtherance of the scheme of forceful control of the country."<sup>142</sup>

Sir Percy Loraine, who had taken over for Herman Norman as His Majesty's Minister to Persia, met with Reza Khan several times in the months after his ascension to the War Ministry. Unsurprisingly, their conversations were focused on Bolsheviks and bringing prosperity to Persia; delicate conversations of oil rights and English influence in government were couched in long assurances of each other's good will and determination to oppose Bolshevism. Loraine was able to ascertain from the War Minister that "He was a Mussulman and a Shia, and therefore, anti-Bolshevik. Only Persians whose Islamism had been tainted with heresy could co-operate with Bolshevism." With these assurances aside, the two discussed

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<sup>142</sup> Wright, Denis. *The English Amongst the Persians*. London and New York: I.B. Taurus, 2001. 180-181. See also Majd 61-63, which contains Caldwell's in-depth account of the coup.

Persia's northern oil fields, currently home to competing claims by the Anglo-Persian Oil Company and its American rivals; Loraine wrote that he was hopeful of Reza's cooperation "if it comes to the point of forcing a new concession through the Medjliss [representative assemblies]." Loraine's glowing report in January of 1922 waxed eloquent about Reza Shah's striking character and his monumental improvements to the Persian Army before concluding that "I shall endeavor to keep in touch with him, without in the present sensitive state of public opinion compromising him in any way, and keep him enlightened as regards the true state of affairs in matters of mutual interest to our two countries." Loraine's words describe covert empire in a nutshell. It seemed that for the time, at least, the "Bolshevik" situation in Persia had been dealt with.<sup>143</sup>

In Persia perhaps more than anywhere else, we see the competing desires of British administrators to maintain influence over the government in Tehran and at the same time to reduce expenditures and withdraw vulnerable and costly military forces. The initial approach displayed strong tendencies towards covert empire, but was nonetheless handicapped by Cox, Norman, and Curzon's inability to let go of the Tehran project. Their attempts to influence Persian policy through the Anglo-Persian Agreement and British officers in the Cossacks and South Persian Rifles proved too heavy-handed, and the maintenance of all of these military forces and their performance itself proved too taxing on the imperial will and the imperial treasury. The fall of the Vossough-ed-Dowleh ministry and the order to begin recalling British troops from Persia signaled the failure of this initial attempt, and suggested the need for a new, more subtle, and cheaper means of defending British influence. This desire for an empire that was cheap, covert, and efficient eventually drove General Ironside to place on the throne of Persia one of the most brutal dictators of the early twentieth century.

Unpacking the issue of Bolshevism is most difficult in the border regions. This is largely because there *was* a real Bolshevik threat to these areas, but this was rarely the threat Britons were discussing

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143 See also Loraine, Percy. Letter to the Foreign Secretary. *British Documents on Foreign Affairs- reports and papers from the foreign office confidential print, Part II*. Watt, Series B, Volume X, Documents 233, 243.

when they used the word. The fact that Bolshevism was at once a real force in policy and also a justification for all sorts of unrelated policy reactions is what makes the British treatment of Bolshevism in the interwar Middle East seem so irrational and so eclectic. We find, in the end, that the threat of Bolshevism did produce reactions in British policy, especially in areas like the Caucasus and Gilan. We also find, though, that this threat was greatly exaggerated by agents unwilling to relinquish their claim to local authority and imperial resources. We also find that Bolshevism often refers to the kind of popular agitation that necessitated the creation of a covert form of empire. In this last instance, the elusive threat of shadow Bolshevism is invoked time and again in order to justify a suspiciously un-democratic form of rule.

#### **Chapter 4: The Ideological Threat of Bolshevik Agitation in the Interior of the Empire**

In the history of British imperial administration, we can identify a trend of dismissing calls for independence, reform, and self-government by claiming that they originate from a radical fringe of society. By assigning dissenting views to this fringe element, the British often downplayed the grievances of the moment and comforted themselves with the knowledge that most of their subjects were amicable to British rule. In fact, British officials have often argued (ironically) that the presence of this radical minority agitating for self-rule necessitates firmer British control in order to maintain peace and stability. This phenomenon offers the best explanation for the Bolshevik scare in the interior of the British Empire in the interwar period. From Ireland to the Raj, British officials assigned demands for self-government (or at home, demands for social and political change) to Bolshevik radicals. This applied especially to the Middle East and Central Asia, where calls for self-government, political reform, or independence were easily attributed to Bolshevik rabble-rousing. Even India, almost two thousand kilometers from the nearest Soviet frontier, saw a tightening of borders and a restriction of civil liberties. In short, the efforts of the British in Asia were often justified by the threat of communist revolution, but the resulting policy was often far more effective at repressing the local population than it was at combating international Bolshevism.

Throughout this study, we have witnessed multiple instances in which British officers and officials, when confronted with populations who were unwilling to accept British interference and control, shied away from admitting that perhaps the British were unwelcome by decrying the dissenters

and protesters as Bolshevik sympathizers. When Afghans proved distrustful of British overtures, the British attributed the distrust not to the century of imperial conflict between the two nations, but to Bolshevik agitators and agents. When Major General Dunsterville's column of armoured cars arrived to occupy the Caucasus and received a lukewarm welcome, Dunsterville blamed "the revolution" which had "so taken the heart out of these men."<sup>144</sup> In Persia, General Malleon maintained that "Bitter anti-British propaganda is spreading everywhere, but nevertheless British rule would be welcomed by the whole population."<sup>145</sup> In general, as popular uprisings and nationalist outcries rocked the British Empire in the Middle East, the British refused to accept that they were an unwelcome force in the region, and continued to maintain, whether for their own peace of mind or for the sake of observers back home, that the discontent in their colonies was a product of radical Bolshevik intrusion.

In the summer of 1920, the British Mandate of Iraq was in turmoil. The British had been granted control of Iraq by a League of Nations Mandate, which most locals considered no more than a "flimsy imperial disguise."<sup>146</sup> Joining a wave of protest that began in Egypt in 1919 and swept across the Middle East, Iraqi nationalists and tribes, Arab and Kurdish, attacked British personnel and raided British outposts. Priya Satia attributes the insurgency primarily to resentment of the Mandate and the collapse of Wilsonian nationalism in 1920; the British administrators at the time found this to be an inconvenient explanation. Instead, A.T. Wilson, the Civil Commissioner at Baghdad, insisted that "What we are up against is anarchy plus fanaticism. There is little or no Nationalism."<sup>147</sup> Gertrude Bell, Wilson's advisor in Baghdad and after T.E. Lawrence, one of the most famous interwar British agents, refrained from using

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144 Dunsterville 4.

145 Malleon, Wilfred. Memorandum on the Military Situation in Persia, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs-reports and papers from the foreign office confidential print, Part II*. Series A, Volume II, Document 248.

146 Satia 202.

147 Darwin, John. *Britain, Egypt, and the Middle East: Imperial policy in the aftermath of war, 1918-1922*. New York:

St. Martin's Press, 1981. 200.

the word “Bolshevik” but acknowledged that outside influences, including “the propaganda going on from Syria,” had given “extremists” in Iraq the leverage they needed.<sup>148</sup>

The higher levels of the British administration had no doubt about who the “extremists” might be. In July, at the height of the violence, General Haldane, the General Officer Commanding, Mesopotamia, wrote to his superiors in the War Office of the increasing danger and severity of the “risings”, but followed up with an insistence that “External intrigue organized and synchronized with recent renewed Bolshevik activity is at the bottom of the disturbances.”<sup>149</sup> A general intelligence summary on Mesopotamia submitted to the Cabinet that month concurred with Haldane, arguing (without concern for the facts) that “the Arabs have not put forward any specific grievances and the cause of the rising is attributed to external Bolshevik intrigue.”<sup>150</sup> By the end of 1920, it seems that the bogeyman of Bolshevism had enabled the British to hold onto their delusions through seven months of bitter conflict; the High Commissioner told the Cabinet that “there is no real desire in Mesopotamia for an Arab government, and the Arabs would appreciate British rule.”<sup>151</sup>

In Iraq, at least, the excuse of Bolshevism was conveniently close; sources of possible Bolshevik propaganda were just north of Mosul, in the Caucasus and Gilan. The threat of a Bolshevik incursion on India, however, was absolutely unrealistic; sixty years later, at the height of its military power, the Soviet Union failed even to subdue Afghanistan, let alone reach the sprawling heartland of India. Even the more ephemeral threat of propaganda invoked so skillfully in Iraq seems obviously implausible in India. However, the danger of Red infiltration and revolution remained a favored topic of discussion amongst British officials in India. Both British and Bolshevik personnel recognized India as the capstone in their Central Asian projects, and the British continually discussed it as the focus of Bolshevik propaganda efforts.

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148 Bell 137.

149 United Kingdom. Summary of Situation in Mesopotamia. 234.

150 United Kingdom. Secret Admiralty Intelligence Summary for the Week Ending in 24 July, 1920. Cabinet Papers, CAB 24/109 (1695). 474.

151 Fromkin 453.

In a repeat of a phenomenon observed in the border regions, the Bolsheviks' publicity of their sincere but ultimately unrealistic desire bring revolution to India played right into British hands. In their construction of delusions and facades to excuse the perpetuation of the Empire in India, the British were able to make good use of the fact that "there was a representative of the Bolshevik government [in the Caucasus] who was especially entrusted with the task of disturbing India."<sup>152</sup> A resolution passed by the Tashkent Soviet in September of 1919 allegedly declared that "It is necessary at once, and at all costs, to ally ourselves closely with South China and North India . . ."<sup>153</sup> This type of rhetoric allowed E.W. Birse and others to make the case that "the overthrow of British rule in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and India" was "the chief aim" of the Bolsheviks in their advance through Central Asia and the Middle East.<sup>154</sup>

The Bolshevik threat seems to have provided the Raj with a sufficient excuse to tighten borders and monitor the movement of populations in their Eastern empire even more closely than before. An intelligence report from January of 1920 admitted almost reluctantly that ""There seems to be little evidence of any Bolshevik propaganda, or of adherence to Bolshevik doctrines, amongst the people in general." The author further admits that no "Bolshevik emissaries" have yet been found in India. However, the report quickly went on to affirm the danger: "But it is known that Bolshevik agents (Indians and others) are working outside of India and are prepared to use any existing causes of unrest . . . as a field for their propaganda." The report concluded that Bolshevik propaganda posed a grave threat and recommended increasing passport checkpoints and policemen on the roads all along the borders of India.<sup>155</sup> In a similar vein, the British Consul-General at Kashgar wrote in his diary that "Bolshevik agents swarm in Ferghana and to prevent their activities extending to China and so to India, which country they

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152 United Kingdom. Minutes of a Meeting of the Imperial War Cabinet, 12 December 1918. Cabinet Papers, CAB 23/42. 74.

153 Watt, Series A: Volume II: Document 269.

154 Watt, Series A: Volume II: Document 27.

155 Watt, Series A: Volume II, Document 378.

regard as most important for their propaganda, I have recommended to the Chinese the closing of the frontier entirely until matters reach a more settled aspect.”<sup>156</sup>

Measures against Bolshevism were easily transformed into more general heavy-handed tactics to maintain stability. The report on the situation in India specified ominously that, although no Bolsheviks had been found, “a few suspicious characters have been arrested or detained.” Under threat of Bolshevik infiltration from abroad, it was reasonable that “The C.I.D. [Indian Central Intelligence Directorate] have already amassed a great deal of detailed information regarding these men and their activities and connections, and every possible precaution is being and will be taken to prevent their entry into India.”<sup>157</sup> The threat of Bolshevism was thus used as effectively in India as in other parts of the Empire. As in other parts of Central Asia, shadow Bolshevism was used to discredit dissenters and simultaneously justify heavy-handed British coercion tactics designed to control the population.

British officials were not the only ones on the interior of Empire to manipulate the spectral threat of Bolshevism to serve their own political ends. Colonial collaborators and local authorities especially in Hashemite Arabia proved adept at tapping into the British paranoia of Bolshevism. These indigenous authorities seem to have in some instances identified the coded way in which the British used Bolshevism as a cypher for any politically undesirable situation, and employed it for their own purposes in their communication with the British government.

A Foreign Office report from Jeddah included a long discourse by King Hussein of Mecca in which he claims that a strong Arab state throughout the Middle East was necessary in order to prevent the spread of Bolshevism. In this discourse, he raised the spectre of nineteenth century British policy under which the Ottoman Turkish regime was supported as a barrier against the intrusion of French and tsarist ambitions on the “road to India” which ran through Suez and the Persian Gulf. Hussein claimed that the

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156 Macartney, George. Diary Entry. *British Documents on Foreign Affairs- reports and papers from the foreign office confidential print, Part II*. Series A, Volume II, Document 380.

157 Watt, Series A: Volume II, Document 378.

threat of Bolshevism was dire in Persia and Iraq; in response, the Emir said that “somebody had to take Turkey’s place- and who but the Arabs?”<sup>158</sup>

In several fascinating episodes that point to the astuteness of colonial subjects, local figures compare their political rivals to Bolsheviks, seemingly understanding that this will trigger severe alarm bells in the British imperial psyche. The British consul at Jeddah reported in December of 1920 that Al-Qibla, a local newspaper in Hashemite Mecca, “insinuates that the Jews are there [in Palestine] for no good purpose, and gives an instance of alleged Zionist pro-Bolshevik agitation.”<sup>159</sup> A later edition, printed in 1921, made additional accusations of Bolshevism against the Jews in Palestine, saying that “when the Zionists first came to Palestine they circulated Bolshevik proclamations, and this cost Great Britain much money and many lives.”<sup>160</sup> The editor of Al-Qibla clearly understood that anything that could be identified as “Bolshevik” would never receive British support, and that the Jewish settlers in Palestine made easy targets given that many of them came from Russia. In a much greater stretch of political imagination, King Hussein drew comparisons between Bolshevism and the Wahabist philosophy of his rival, Ibn Saud, saying that “Wahabism is like Bolshevism”<sup>161</sup> and arguing that he and the British should work together against both movements.

It seems that these none-too-subtle invocations of the Bolshevik threat were effective: in a memorandum on the subsidies being given to Arab chieftains, a British agent is driven to comment that the lands of the Hashemites “could do great harm if they fell into the hands of the Bolsheviks or Nationalist Turks, not only in [the local region] but in all parts of the Empire from which pilgrims annually meet at Mecca.” There is no doubt that when most Britons read “all parts of the Empire from which pilgrims annually meet”, they thought first of India. He concluded that equal subsidies to Hashem and Saud must be maintained if not increased, despite Hussein’s waning effectiveness.<sup>162</sup>

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158 Watt, Series B: Volume II, Document 175.

159 Ibid. Document 165.

160 Ibid. Document 244.

161 Watt, Series B: Volume II, Document

162 Ibid. Document 64.

In Persia, Reza Khan also seemed to understand what the British wanted to hear with regards to Bolshevism. In an exchange that seems strangely like test of political usefulness, Sir Percy Loraine related to Reza Khan that the Soviets had opened a consulate in Kerman, in southern Persia. He proceeded to ask Reza's opinion as to the Russians' intentions in opening a consul in Kerman "where there are no Russian subjects, and where the Russians can have no consular interests." Reza Khan clearly passed the test when he replied that "their sole objective is the spread of Communist propaganda, and that the opening of these consulates in the south was undoubtedly not only for the spread of Bolshevik propaganda in Persia, but for use as advanced posts for pushing agents and propaganda into India."<sup>163</sup> Sir Percy Loraine's endorsement of Reza Khan's government followed shortly after.

Clearly this shadow Bolshevism was an amorphous tool, and the potential for "Bolshevik" conspiracy and intrigue to take root in a particular region seemed to be limited only by the imaginations of those who stood to gain by its presence. Also, as we see in the example of Loraine and Reza Khan, colonial collaborators' coded use of Bolshevism fed back into British paranoia and anxiety, completing the fabricated reality that overlaid official renditions of British rule in Central Asia.

The overwhelming trend in Turkey and Afghanistan, in the Caucasus and Persia, and in Mesopotamia and India was for the British to meet any difficulty with the indigenous population with the excuse of Bolshevism. This trend continued to the highest levels of the British government, to the extent that a Directorate of Intelligence report circulated to the British Cabinet by the Home Secretary was able to claim without qualification that

The state of political and religious unrest which exists to-day throughout the Middle East —from the borders of the Black and Caspian Seas southward through Trans-Caucasia to Persia and eastward through Turkestan and Afghanistan to the northern frontier of India-

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163 Loraine, Sir Percy. Report of Interviews with the War Minister on 14 and 15 May, 1922. *British Documents on Foreign Affairs- reports and papers from the foreign office confidential print, Part II. Series B, Volume X, Document 304.*

is a legacy of the Great War, which may be directly attributed to the collapse of the Russian and Turkish Empires . . . The anti-British attitude, which is so conspicuous a feature of the present agitation in this part of the world, can be traced to the work of German agents during the war and to the steady and persistent progress of Bolshevik propaganda . . . <sup>164</sup>

By creating Bolshevism where none existed, the British created a role for their empire in a place where they were in reality totally unwelcome.

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164 United Kingdom Directorate of Intelligence. Special Report, No. 17, June 1920: Notes on the Present Political Situation in Central Asia. Cabinet Papers, CAB 24/108 (CP 1585). 326.

## Conclusion

At the beginning of this investigation, we set out to explain the large number of rational inconsistencies that appear in British policy towards Bolshevism in the interwar Middle East. Why, for instance, did the British administration produce such varied and inconsistent policies towards Bolshevism? Why did the concern about Bolshevik propaganda outlive the conclusion that Bolshevism and Islam are ideologically incompatible? Why did the British attach so much importance to the defense of Central Asia and then refuse to commit to it? These are complex questions, and the answers offer insights about the nature of government action and imperial agenda that go beyond the Foreign Office outposts of the interwar Middle East.

Stepping back from the issue and examining it in the broadest possible context, we find that one of the most important revelations of this study is about the highly conflicted nature of governments and empires. The British did not have a unity of purpose in their approach to the Middle East. British agents on the ground were working towards their own agenda, and were not in sync with the higher levels of the British government. The holders of high offices were themselves in conflict over the future of Britain in the Middle East, and often pursued projects at odds with one another. The phenomenon of agency capture and the personal obsessions of specific leaders drove the British government in multiple directions at once. Specifically, the desire of agents on the ground to maintain and expand the roll of the Empire directly conflicted with the desires of the higher levels of government to reduce and remove imperial commitments. George Curzon's preconceptions about the imperial defense of India clashed with Winston Churchill's deep-seated anxieties about the international fight against Bolshevism. This divisiveness goes a long way towards explaining the ineffective British support of the Caucasus and north Persia and the vastly different levels of importance that various Britons assigned to the fight against

Bolshevism. It also illustrates more generally the dangers of viewing empires and nations as rational unitary actors, and points to the importance of analyzing conflict and difference of approach within a government.

As dangerous as it is to assume that the British Empire acted with a unity of purpose, it is even more dangerous to assume that it acted with clarity of vision. The faults of the intelligence apparatus in the British Middle East and the lack of critical analysis by British officials explain a great deal of irrational British policy. The British paranoia about a Turco-Afghan-Bolshevik alliance, British policy designed to combat a nonexistent Bolshevik military threat, and the British misunderstanding of Bolsheviks and Middle Eastern Muslim nationalists alike all grew out of the inaccuracy of available data on the actual situation in the Middle East. The intelligence situation in the Middle East illustrates how a culture of informal and unprofessional intelligence can take root, and also points to the massive impact such a culture can have on policy. When an intelligence apparatus with a culture of anti-empiricism becomes associated with a particular agenda (such as the perpetuation of imperial control), the resulting agency capture can totally alter the information reaching higher levels of policy makers and can in effect blind a government to what is going on inside its' own territory. This is an important lesson for governments, but is also an important reminder for historians. In weighing the actions of the British agents in the Middle East, it is critical to keep in mind that the facts available to the current historical community are not the "facts" that informed these individuals in the early 1920s.

Our third major conclusion that goes beyond the context of time and place has to do with the self-perpetuating impulse of empire. The British Empire in the Middle East seemed in 1920 to be collapsing under the weight of financial expenditure, popular nationalism, and the increasing disapproval of the British public. The officials of this empire produced a great deal of fiction about Bolshevism in large part in order to remake an imperial role in a time and place where that role was rapidly collapsing. When the actions of British administrators seemed inappropriate or contradictory, often the

administrators were twisting words and manipulating rhetoric in an attempt to conceal their desperate schemes of imperial control. Bolshevism, as a poorly-understood and broadly used term, was an invaluable rhetorical tool for explaining any kind of imperial behavior. The lack of academic understanding of Bolshevism went hand-in-hand with the intense emotional anxieties that it inspired as an ideology. As a source of fear and as a vehicle of intentional vagueness and misunderstanding, Bolshevism proved critical in the construction of a covert imperial apparatus. The construction of this shadow empire in the Middle East explains a great deal of the contradictory policy towards Persia, the paranoia of the British on the interior of the Empire, and the coded use of the word “Bolshevism” in the halls of British administration.

When we meld these three insights together, the irrational behavior of the British Empire becomes explainable. The British in the early 1920s experienced a myriad of compounding problems that made a single, comprehensive approach to Bolshevism in the Middle East impossible. The experience of the late nineteenth century and the First World War produced a large number of officials who were out of touch with the desires of the British public and who were determined to perpetuate an empire out of time. The environment of faulty intelligence that persisted from the Edwardian era allowed these officials to twist and recreate numerous meanings of words like “Bolshevism” to suit their individual needs. Therefore, the final product of this study should perhaps be a warning about rhetorical manipulation in policy-making. Ideologies like “nationalism,” “Bolshevism,” or in the modern day “Islamic fundamentalism” describe diverse and complex belief systems that are different for different people. In an environment of competing policy agendas, ideologies like these, which inspire intense emotional responses but which can be wielded through vague and highly stereotyped brevities, should always be handled carefully. If the British experience of the interwar Middle East teaches us anything, it is that these simple terms can carry any number of meanings and serve any number of agendas; it all depends on the individual who first chooses to cry “Bolshevik!”

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