

COLONEL ELLIS: AT THE SOUTHERN OUTSKIRTS OF RUSSIA



An Australian, born in Sydney, [Charles Ellis](#) served with the Middlesex Regiment in France, Egypt and India in the First World War. In 1918 he was posted to north east Persia as a member of the [Malleson Mission](#) to Meshed and Transcaspia. He took part in military operations in Transcaucasia, Central Asia and Afghanistan. Later, between two World wars, during WW2 and after it he served in British Military missions in the Balkans, South-East Asia and the Far East. After retirement he became a professional historian and wrote a book «The Transcaspian Episode» (1963), which is a detailed account of the British intervention in Transcaucasia and Central Asia he had participated in. It contains impressions of the Australian about poorly known episodes of the WW1 and the Civil War at the southern outskirts of Russia.

After serving as an infantry officer for two years in France and Egypt I was posted to India, and in the autumn of 1917 found myself attached to a battalion of the South Lancashire Regiment stationed at Quetta in Baluchistan. Apart from minor brushes with Marri tribesmen, this was garrison soldiering, but early in 1918 there were rumours of operations against gun-runners and raiders in Seistan in south-east Persia. When news of the impending dispatch of a British Military mission to Meshed became known in the summer I volunteered, and on the strength of some knowledge of Russian and Persian (acquired to ease the boredom of garrison service) I was accepted and in July 1918 was posted to Meshed.

The Mission at Meshed under the command of Major-General [Wilfrid Malleson](#) consisted of three or four officers, a field-wireless unit and a small guard of Indian cavalry. Contact had been made with anti-Bolshevik rebels against a Soviet government at Tashkent, and a relationship with them was growing up that was to lead to British and Indian troops being involved in military operations against Bolshevik troops along the Central Asian railway.

In late 1918, after the Armistice, danger of the German or Turkish conquer of the oil fields of Azerbaijan did not exist any more. The British Military Mission switched its attention to the events in the central Asia. Ellis arrived in Ashkhabad which then was under control of the White forces, local counter-revolutionaries and General Malleson's troops.

In times of national crisis, particularly of a revolutionary nature, a large part of the population of cities seems to be seized with a hectic desire to eat, drink and be merry - come what may. This behavior is most noticeable among the class of people who stand to lose most by disturbance of the social order, and is probably a gesture of defiance against Fate. Even in the little Central Asian city of Ashkhabad something of this spirit was observable among the Russians whose life and prospects had been upset by revolution and civil war. Restaurants and cafes were full, and a number of establishments of the café chantant type did a roaring business. Ashkhabad possessed no theatre, but several cinemas continued to show old films, many of them American slap-stick comedies and French bedroom farces of the old Max Linder type.

Apart from the large number of officers at staff headquarters, a disproportionate number seemed to spend long spells of leave from the front. A certain number of ex-officers and officials of the old regime, together with their families, had taken refuge in Transcaspia before the fall of Baku; others had returned from Persia where they had betaken themselves during the previous Bolshevik regime.

The business community, largely Armenian, had money to spend, and spent it freely. Many officials, whose law salaries were a cause of complaint against the government, spent long hours in cafes engaged in interminable discussion over glasses of tea or a bottle of cheap Caucasian wine. Vodka was on sale, but

was not cheap; good brandy was, however, obtainable at a reasonable price and was usually drunk in the local fashion with a lump of sugar and a slice of lemon to follow.

Entertainment was provided by a horde of young ladies who had mysteriously descended on Ashkhabad from heaven knows where. Many of these were of local vintage, pursuing their vocation in private when times were bad and facilities for public entertainment and display were limited.

Russian hospitality needs no special occasion to express itself, being limited solely by means. In Ashkhabad, at this time, there was no end to private parties; dinners, teas or simply informal gatherings to drink and gossip. Everybody talked endlessly. Any subject that came up for discussion was analyzed, criticized, praised or condemned in a babble of voices, each speaker appearing to derive pleasure from the joy of argument rather than from any particular interest in the subject under discussion. Their quick intelligent Russian minds seized on any point that was raised; questioned it as a matter of course; than, like children, tiring of a game, abandoned it for something else.

In their attitude towards events in their own country they often displayed a curious blend of resignation with a rather naïve sense of indignation that such things were allowed to happen. Hatred of the Bolsheviks was common, but it seemed often to be based on some personal experience of an unpleasant nature. One old gentleman would wind up a fierce denunciation of the Tashkent regime with the complaint: "Would you believe it; they stole forty poods of sugar from my store; forty poods! (1 pood - 16 kg)".

Although Russians are generally free from snobbery, some of the ladies took pleasure in recounting, with sighs, stories of their former splendid estate, their acquaintance with prince So-and-So and other past glories. All this was harmless, and who would have wished to deprive them in their present situation of their moments of reminiscence or fantasy?

That these friendly good-natured people had another side to their character was evident from what had been happening all around us. That ruthlessness and cruelty were not confined to the "downtrodden workers and peasants" was shown by the behavior of both Reds and Whites, and the graduations in between. It was true that the workers and peasants, relieved of the restraints of the former government, of religion and of the mystique of Tsardom, had displayed, and were still displaying, a ferocity and callousness towards their former "betters" that put the [Jacquerie](#) of 1789 in the shade. In their reaction to this, White officers and officials were capable of equal brutality, particularly towards Bolshevik leaders who fell into their hands. An unhappy outcome of all this was the disposition, latter displayed by both sides, to put the blame for this conduct on to the "interventionists".

At least half of the population of Ashkhabad consisted of various types of Turkmans, Uzbeks, Persians and Caucasians. A large colony of Armenians, mostly traders and workmen, occupied the densely populated quarter near the railway station and yards. The Armenians provided the bulk of the Transcaspian troops, not through any process of selection but because many Russians, being railway workers, were "indispensable", or else were able, through Trades Union influence, to put themselves in that class and avoid being sent to the front.

It was difficult to determine what occupation, if any, was followed by the Asian community. Most of them seemed to spend their time sitting about in the native bazaars on the outskirts of the town or wandering about the streets. The Turkman was more often than not a visitor from a neighbouring aul or native village; some were market gardeners, coachmen or small traders in the bazaars; others belonged to the improvised cavalry units that were, nominally, at least, part of the armed forces. The Russians disliked and feared these, an attitude that derived from the appreciation of the fact that the Turkmans disliked Russians in general, but also from the stories of Turkman atrocities towards prisoners and stragglers.

Although outwardly there was nothing abnormal about the appearance and day-to-day life of Ashkhabad, the atmosphere of the town was tense. There was little of the feeling of common purpose among the people as a whole; various sections of the community eyed one another with suspicion or dislike; even among people who had most to lose by the fall of the government there was criticism of its members and of the administration in general. Fear or dislike of Bolshevism had been a unifying force, at least among a majority of the people; both sentiments still existed, but were overlaid by local faction, by jealousies, by fear of the Turkmans, and, among most Russians, by suspicion of the British. The Armenians who feared the Turks and Turkman tribesmen, and did not share the national pride of the Russians, were largely pro-British; the Turkmans were pro-Turk, but were not unfriendly toward the British. The Socialist-revolutionaries distrusted

the Mensheviks, and both disliked or feared the Bolsheviks. The Russian "bourgeois" and most ex-officials and former officers despised all the socialist groups, and longed for the good old days.

In an atmosphere such as this it could hardly be expected that General Malleson, with his "hard-boiled" temperament, would evince any sentimental preferences for one group or another. His attitude was determined by the task he had undertaken, and by his training as an Indian army officer to get on with his job with very little regard for the teeming life going on around him. It is doubtful that General Malleson found anything of interest or worthy of special sympathy in Transcaspia, unless it was the beautiful Tekke carpets, a number of which he bought or received as gifts.

Ashkhabad, although a fairly large town and the capital of the province since [Skobelev's](#) time, had little of historical interest. No earlier city had occupied its site as was the case with Merv. It had been laid out in the spacious Russian style as a military and administrative center, its government structures being solidly built, but seldom higher than two floors. This was chiefly because of the prevalent earthquake shocks, one of which was to destroy part of the town some years later.

The cantonment and barracks were far superior in design and structure to similar constructions in India at that time. Quarters for both officers and other ranks were excellent; bathrooms and kitchens abandoned and there was a plentiful supply of hot and cold water. Parade-grounds were spacious and surrounded by trees. Any ideas that British officers may have entertained about the makeshift character of Russian military posts were quickly dispelled by sight of the very substantial and commodious establishments in Ashkhabad, Merv and Bairam Ali.

Throughout Transcaspia the solid and permanent character of Russian buildings was evident. The railway, running through difficult desert country, often with shifting sands, had been solidly built; its stations, goods depots, tanks and rolling stock of excellent design, the roomy passenger coaches comfortable and well appointed. There was much superficial dilapidation as a result of war-time neglect and recent disturbance, but less than might have been expected.

The formation of an All-Russian government at Omsk by Kolchak, and the successes achieved by [Denikin's](#) forces in South Russia and the North Caucasus, suggested that a Bolshevik collapse was within the realm of possibility. The future of anti-Bolshevik regimes such as the Transcaspian Committee, thus seemed to depend on the outcome of civil-war operations elsewhere. In the prevailing atmosphere in Europe, still conditioned by the stress and sharp judgement of war, the hopes of the majority of the people were placed on the side of the Whites, who, it was generally considered, represented the forces of law and order and normality. As time was to show, this was a simplification of a complex issue, but the stresses and strains of four years of war, and the shock of violent revolution in Russia with its new leaders preaching revolt and disorder, had produced an emotional state of mind in which judgements could hardly be expected to be based on objective and balanced criteria.

Although public opinion in the West, as a whole, had been sympathetic towards the Russian revolution, the excesses of Bolshevism and the violence of the Communist propaganda attack against the former allies of Russia alienated even that section of the community that favoured non-interference in Russian affairs. Intervention, despite reaction against Communism, was, however, generally unpopular, and as the earlier progress of White armies turned to failure and disaster, their leaders displaying no understanding of the revolutionary mood of the Russian people, the demand for the withdrawal of Allied missions and troops became general in Western Europe and America. In remote Meshed little was heard of these developments, but it was clear that, with the changed situation, withdrawal from advanced and, in certain cases, untenable positions was only a question of time.

On the 21 January it was decided to withdraw the British Military Mission from Transcaspia. The Transcaspian Government collapsed under the Red Army advance in the summer of 1919.

Allied support of the White reaction against the Bolshevik regime which followed the collapse of the Central Powers was brought about partly as a response to declared Bolshevik plans and agitation for world revolution. Seen retrospectively, intervention and support of White generals may have been a mistaken policy, but the circumstances which gave rise to intervention and support of anti-Bolsheviks forces are often forgotten or ignored.

The failure of the counter-revolution was perhaps inevitable and was due to a variety of causes, among which were lack of unity among the various White organizations, absence of any positive programme or

appeal for popular support, and Russian suspicion of foreign intervention. There was little support at first for the Communists outside the larger cities, but Tsarism was bankrupt and the clock could not be put back. There was much popular apathy and confusion. The strong anti-Western and, in particular, anti-British sentiment of a large section of the Russian people made them suspicious and resentful of foreign interference.

The Bolsheviks alone were united and single-minded. Their original programme was simple: peace and the land to the toiler. They did not, as they have since thought to persuade themselves and the world, make the revolution. They took it over from the weak hands of the Liberals and right-wing Socialist Revolutionaries and "cadets", letting loose the forces of chaos and disorder. Their achievement has been reconstruction of the state on the ruins of the old order, not on lines of Social Democracy but a centralized autocracy on traditional Russian lines, reasserting the age-old Russian suspicion of the West, nationalism, and a new Orthodoxy, that of Marxism (in a distorted form) replacing the old Orthodoxy of Byzantium and Moscow. The traditional Tsarist instruments of control and coercion have been reimposed: the secret police, censorship, control of the printing press, the judiciary and education. While denouncing imperialism and colonialism abroad, a Soviet Russian colonial regime has been imposed by force on the 30,000,000 peoples of Central Asia and Caucasia, with sops to national sentiment in the form of encouragement of local "culture" and the arts. Central Asia has become a watch-tower for the east, a military base, and a show window for the peoples of the Asian and African continents, as well as an area for colonization and industrial development.

C.H. Ellis. The Transcaspian Episode. 1918-1919. 1963