

WITH GENERAL DUNSTERVILLE IN PERSIA AND TRANSCAUCASIA



On the 29th of January 1918 a party of officers and NCO's sailed from Southampton for an "unknown destination". They represented almost every Division of the British Army in France. There were Englishmen, Irishmen and Scots, Canadians, New Zealanders, South Africans and Australians and were selected volunteers for what the Staff of the War Office in an official letter marked secret and confidential, chose to call "a hazardous enterprise". The party from France was later joined by smaller parties from Palestine, Salonica and Mesopotamia, marking a total of roughly 200 officers and 200 NCOs.

Their destination was in reality the Southern Caucasus - their commander the brilliant diplomat and hitherto successful soldier, [Major-General L. C. Dunsterville](#) – CB.CSI - the Stalky who for long has delighted the youthful readers of Kipling. The object of the mission which is known as [Dunsterforce](#) were both offensive and defensive in their

nature and speaking broadly, were to prevent the enemy reaching Afghanistan and India, by creating in the Caucasus a force to oppose to the Central Powers.

One of the deeply laid pre-war schemes of the Germans was the penetration of the Middle East by means of the long dreamed of Berlin to Baghdad railway; this became an impossible one when Baghdad fell into the hands of the British. There was, however in another way in which the penetration of the Middle East could be effected - this was by means of the railway running eastwards through the Caucasus from Batum to Baku – and beyond the Caspian from Krasnovodsk to Bokhara. If passage for small parties of officers and other troops could be secured along these railways, Afghanistan and India would be within easy reach of the propagandist who was always sure to find a number of restless tribes ready to attack the British, provided foreign support in the form of arms and money was forthcoming.

The scheme of Berlin to Bukhara was enthusiastically adopted by the Germans who hoped to make it a success through the agency of their ally the Turk. This project also was doomed to failure while the Russian Army operating in the Caucasus remained efficient. Until the summer of 1917 the Russian battle line held firm from the Eastern shores of the Black Sea across the Caucasus, through Northern Persia until it came in contact with the right flank of the British forces advancing through Mesopotamia. By the autumn of 1917 the dire effects of the Russian revolution had spread to the troops operating in the Caucasus. These divisions had hitherto carried out offensive operations of the greatest service to the Allies but when liberty, fraternity and equality had done their worst nothing remained of the whole Caucasus army save a small Russian detachment of all arms united by purely personal ties to the heroic commander [Colonel Bicherakhov](#). These troops, chiefly Cossacks, will be mentioned later.

Thus in a few months the enemies of the Turks and Germans had practically vanished. They had either become ardent pacifists, politicians or isolated groups of soldiers heartily tired of war, and intent on returning to their own homes at all costs, and as quickly as possible. The Turk quickly seized this opportunity for securing a bloodless victory. Gradually his troops began to work their way along the Caucasian rail way and it seemed towards the end of 1917 that the Turk would

soon be planted firmly in the Caucasus and that German officers and non-commissioned officers would soon be making themselves prominent among the frontier tribes of India.

There appeared to be one method left open for checkmating the advancing enemy. At Tiflis there was a mixed population consisting chiefly of Russians, Georgians and Armenians. These parties were by no means united. The explanation of an exceedingly complicated situation appeared to the War Office in London to be somewhat as follows: -The Armenians were filled with exceedingly great fear of the Turk. The Georgian, although he feared the Turk as a distinctly national enemy, found himself often an enemy with the Armenian. The Russian was tired of war and so did not wish to have further fighting with the Turk. (Indeed, if one can judge by national songs, there were in pre-war days the strongest bonds of friendship between the local Mahomedans and the members of the Orthodox Greek Church.

A scheme then, which promised well was to send a part of selected officers to Tiflis to endeavor to unite all three local parties, and act as organizers and leaders of the troops which would be raised to oppose the Turk. The plan was distinctly practical, original, full of possibilities and if it failed the losses in personnel would not be very great.

To the officers of this force delightful prospects seemed to be offered – a new type of warfare, a new country and the leadership of men, and unruly perhaps, but nevertheless likely to make efficient soldiers. It was expected that the Armenians would fight with the utmost enthusiasm against their Mahomedan oppressors and the rest of the Caucasians seemed likely to provide most interesting material. Originally the Russians in the area under discussion had consisted of men outlawed by European Russia. Membership of an outlawed tribe was open to men of any description whatever provided they possessed the following qualifications: - the Orthodox Greek faith, ability to fight, and zeal in the gentle art of plunder. What glorious regiments could have been recruited from such men in 1916?

Unfortunately the ambitions of the *Dunsterforce* in this direction were never realized – by the time that section of the party which had come from France, reached Baghdad by way of Italy, Suez and the Gulf of Basrah, all allied activities in Tiflis had been precluded by the arrival there of Turkish regiments. (It had been expected originally that the party would somehow or other have to pass through territory occupied by Turks and remain isolated from other Allied troops for perhaps two years).

But the most unfortunate circumstance of all, and the factor which made the scheme of reaching Tiflis impossible, was the change in the situation there. The force had been sent six months too late. The revolution had taken all martial spirit out of the Caucasians. In Tiflis the magnified reports of the very real German victories on the Western Front in April and May of 1918 had made it appear probable that Germany would win the war and the citizen of Tiflis naturally asked himself - Why have the British here to prolong the War? The Georgians hoped that the Germans would eventually turn out the Turks. The Armenians still feared massacre but in spite of this, the revolution had completely destroyed any sustained effort at resistance. The result of all this was that no useful object could be attained in persevering in the attempt to reach Tiflis, even if that had been possible... Indeed, the Senior General Staff officer of the Party together with two other officers managed to reach the neighborhood of Tiflis but they were eventually seized by the Bolsheviks. The fate of the latter is obscure but it is certain that Colonel Pike (G.S.O) was murdered.

An alternative plan, and the only one likely to yield fruitful results was to reach Baku, the key to the Caspian. This was eventually done and most valuable services rendered to the Allied cause.



Area of activities of the Dunsterforce mission. Main towns and locations mentioned in this text are shown by numbers:

1 - Bagdad; 2 - Tehran; 3 - Baku; 4 - Tiflis; 5 - Hamadan; 6 - Kazvin; 7 - Zinjan; 8 - Resht; 9 - Enzeli; 10 - the Urmieh Lake; 11 - Krasnovodsk; 12 - Tabriz; 13 - Batum; 14 - Kermanshah; 15 - Sakhiz.

Baku is the exchange market for the whole of the tribes living on the shores of the Caspian – for the Russians and Cossacks to the North, the Turcomans to the East, the Persians and Gelanis to the South and sections of the Tartars, Georgians and Armenians to the West. Russian fishermen brought frozen fish and caviare (sic), the Turcomans wheat and cotton, the [Gilanis](#), rice while the oil-fields of Baku provided practically the whole of the oil used in Central Asia and on the Caspian and Black Seas. If Baku could be saved from falling into the hands of the Turks and Germans, the oil would be denied to them, the Caucasian railways stopped from running and the door to Central Asia would be closed to them and further more they would be unable to procure quantities of foodstuffs greatly needed in Germany itself.

Thus the object of the *Dunsterforce* now became to reach Baku and to organize its defenders against the enemy. Until the end of July 1918, it was impossible for the party even to reach Baku, because firstly Persia, hostile to the British, had to be passed through, and secondly, the Government in Baku (largely a Bolshevik one) refused to have anything whatever to do with the British merely as organisers and leaders. It demanded British regiments fully equipped and all other help was stoutly refused. About one full battalion were eventually sent but before this was done, the Dunsterforce was obliged to spend at least four months in winning over the hostile Persians, and organizing and training levies in N.W. Persia. The record of how these two grave difficulties mentioned above, were overcome, would fill at least four goodly sized volumes, and would form one of the most romantic stories of the whole war.

To deal first of all with the Persian question.

Persia theoretically had been neutral since the outbreak of war, but the neutrality was of a type which had never been respected by Turks or Russians and which could not be enforced because there was no Persian army. The Turks had over-run the country destroying crops, and vineyards, pulling down houses to get firewood, commandeering the ploughing oxen and slaughtering any

of the Armenian population who came their way. Later the Russians drove out the Turks but treated the inhabitants in the same ruthless way except they did not persecute the Armenians. They paid for the provisions they purchased by bills, which were never honoured.

The result of all this was that after the Russians had withdrawn the country was in a deplorable condition. The *Dunsterforce* found in the towns people dying in hundreds and even many dead along the roads. The area of land under cultivation had shrunk to a considerable extent and villages once large and prosperous had practically disappeared. There was in the country enough grain to keep the greater part of the people alive, but that grain was in the hands of the wealthy landowners and merchants who, in the absence of any system of control, demanded exorbitant prices which the poor could never pay.

Law and order did not exist. There was a police force, the influence of which was negligible as was the authority of the Central Government. Robbers terrorised and plundered individual travelers and even whole villages. The large landholders with their disorderly retainers, plundered their less fortunate neighbours. The situation may be compared to that stage in English history when "each man did what seemed good in his own eyes and also a great deal which he knew to be absolutely wrong". The nation was without unity. Nominally their Shah and the Central Cabinet were the rulers of the country, but orders from Tehran were not necessarily carried out by the governors of such towns as Hamadan. At Tehran, German and Austrian agents carried out active propaganda and the British later did likewise.

As the result of the constant interference and inroads of foreigners, Turks, Russians, Germans and Austrians there arose gradually a sentiment of Persia for the Persians. The Democrats interpreted this to mean – "out with this British General and his followers who are now about to replace the Russians, who, thanks be to Allah, are now leaving the country".

The first party of the *Dunsterforce* consisting of General Dunsterville and a few officers reached Hamadan on the 11th of February 1918.

This town is situated on the main road running from Baghdad to Enzeli and is of considerable size and importance. The population is considered to be somewhere in the neighborhood of 50,000. There is little evidence of the bygone glory of the place – the greater part of the houses are built of mud - the streets narrow and filthy. Here, where are found the tombs Esther and Mordecai, and where Alexander celebrated some of his wildest orgies, one finds the real Middle East. It is practically untouched by Western civilization. One finds no counterpart of the European quarter of Cairo, of Hong Kong or of Shanghai. Large numbers of unburied dead were found in the streets and on account of hunger and privation, the poorer section of the community had become more like wild animals than human beings – family ties which bind father to child and child to parent seemed to have almost disappeared. In a few cases, cannibalism is known to have occurred.

The officers and NCOs of the party were received with the utmost suspicion by all classes of the community. It was thought that they were the advance guard of invaders, such as the Russians and Turks had been. Hostile meetings were held in the mosques and inflammatory placards were posted up in the streets. No actual attack was made however, - the mob lacked a leader and on several occasions it was this factor alone which saved the force from the extermination. The whole of the Northern Persia at this time was full of arms and ammunition. Whenever one went one saw fierce looking individuals with chests surrounded by at least two rows of cartridges reminiscent of the clumsy weapons to be seen in museums. In addition to the large supply of variegated antique weapons were large numbers of Russian or Turkish rifles, stolen or purchased from departing soldiers by the inhabitants. There was certainly no lack of weapons, but the Persian depends a great deal on bluff. In fact that is almost entirely what he depends upon. He will fight only when it cannot be avoided. Surely a very praiseworthy characteristic in any adversary!

The General issued proclamations stating that he had come to help the inhabitants and help them to once more regain their former prosperity. At first the typical response was: – "the British general

says he comes to bring peace and prosperity! Did we ask for it? Let him keep his peace and prosperity till we demand it. Persia represents a civilization that was at its primetime before the British were ever even heard of and consequently we are not likely to learn much from them".

The Persians soon began to realize that the words of the British were not merely a bid for safety. As soon as the snow on the mountains passes melted, a few lorry loads of wheat seed were somehow got through from Baghdad over most atrocious roads. This grain was distributed to various farmers who were requested to plant rather than sell it. Famine relief was started. A number of individuals who had been brought from various theatres of war to engage "in a hazardous enterprise" found themselves engaged in distributing food to famished natives. The Persian men were put to work in roads and paid two shillings (3 krans) per day - not that they did any appreciable amount of work but the sum they received enabled them to keep body and soul together, and the recipient of the dole had some influence in restraining the more war-like section who were in favor of destroying the unwelcome foreigners.

It make seem that the problem as to how 16 Britishers (15 of whom did not speak Persian) managed to get an unorganized mob of about 6000 Persians started at "working on roads", presented some difficulty, and it did! A proclamation was printed stating that all who were willing to road work for the British at a wage of 3 krans per day, were to come to a certain spot outside the town at 6 o'clock next morning. On the following day the mob turned out in their hundreds and their eagerness to be selected, almost killed the officers concerned - no work was done that day. On the second day an effort was made to issue tickets to the more emaciated natives to entitle them to collect pay at the end of the day's work - again there was a stampede and more work was done.

"I was not pleased," - says General Dunsterville, "at this repeated lack of success and explained to the officer in charge that it was simply owned to his lack of intelligence." "Colonel Duncan (Chief Staff officer to the General) quite agreed with my reproaches and added - the mistake you made is in not making the men sit down. Once they are sitting it is quite easy to keep order." "Next day I received a despairing message from the officer-in-charge, that he was powerless to do anything with the mob. I replied that I would send Colonel Duncan out to show him how to do it; so Colonel Duncan forthwith proceeded and after making some such remark as "Now, you watch me", addressed the crowd in Persian as follows: - "Sit down, sit down, sit down. Nothing till you sit down. Sit down". Whereupon the crowd of several thousands, sat down then the interpreter announced "The Gentlemen will now give tickets to those who are entitled to work. No one must move - all must remain seated." Perfect order reigned and a triumphant smile enlivened the features of the Staff Officer. "Now all you have to do is to go round with a bundle of tickets and issue them to the most hungry looking". With that remark he stepped forward with one ticket in his hand to demonstrate the process. In one moment the whole 6,000 were on top of him and he returned sadder but wiser, admitting another failure, after having been severely trampled on".

Eventually a satisfactory method of distribution was found securing the co-operation of the local civil authorities. As soon as this plan for the payment of the men began to work satisfactorily the starving children - those of say, the age from 4-10 years - were fed. The mothers as a rule brought their children, each of who had an earthenware bowl. They were collected into a closed yard, lined up, and made to file past a cauldron from which each received a bowl of soup. When one batch had received its soup, it was removed to a different yard and another batch took its place.

The work of famine relief was not allowed to go on without opposition. For instance, the bakers closed their shops or demanded still higher prices stating (quite falsely) that "the British had bought all available wheat for their army". Tickets were forged and a certain amount of illegal traffic in tickets always existed. Contractors who supplied the British with goods were imprisoned. Each of these difficulties in turn was met and overcome and in a month a considerable improvement was noticeable in the condition of the people. In three months dead persons in the streets were rarely seen.

Gradually a change came over the people of Hamadan in their attitude towards the British - the original attitude of suspicion gave way to a very real esteem. In the East, everything seems to be exaggerated by report – and in this case the exaggerated reports were favourable. Two hundred miles from Hamadan it was commonly reported in the bazaars and “teahouses”, that the British were feeding the whole population of Hamadan and furthermore the wonderful system of famine relief was to be extended to many other towns.

A very efficient intelligence system was organised. Trustworthy agents were obtained and in a couple of months, the British at Hamadan were in receipt of regularly forwarded information as to affairs throughout the Caucasus and in Persia and as to the strength and vicinity of the Turkish and German troops. By the end of April it was possible to prevent the movement of practically all enemy spies along the road from Kazam to Kermanshah - no small achievement.

As succeeding drafts of the Dunsterforce arrived, a more aggressive policy was adopted. In reality the fighting strength of the force was negligible, but by audacity, results were obtained which under ordinary circumstances, would have required in the district and town of Hamadan a force of a brigade. For instance the Democratic Party in Hamadan which had for its motto “Persia for the Persians”, could not be won over by persuasion. They were too well supplied with German and Austrian gold. The Party was of considerable strength and must have numbered three thousand. Its seven chief leaders within the city including the civil Governor remained obdurate. One night a party of one officer and 5 NCOs quietly took up a position in the vicinity of the house of each of the seven aforesaid obnoxious democrats. At a given hour, each party raided its allotted house, arrested the owner, to the great consternation of the latter, and his numerous female household, put him on a *Ford* van, together with an escort, and started him off for Baghdad. On the following day the democrats found themselves without their leaders. Their misfortune, though, lay chiefly in the fact that they could not raise quite enough determination to retaliate.

The need of troops was always keenly felt by the force and to some extent the difficulty was relieved by recruiting several bodies of levies. The Persians were totally unsuited for warfare against Turkish troops, but when led by few British officers were effective in dealing with robber bands and in rounding up Turkish and German emissaries. They were also utilized for garrison duties at dangerous points on the roads. The activities of these levies had to be supervised as carefully as possible. Sometimes robbers were inadvertently enlisted whose object was to secure a uniform and hence authority to carry on robbery (formally unauthorized) under the guard of authority. The Democratic Party did everything in its power to hinder recruiting stating that to serve the English was to incur everlasting disgrace and that the assassin’s knife would punish any who did so. This opposition had but little effect and recruiting proceeded favourably. A number of levies far in excess of the actual requirements could have been obtained. In the neighbourhood of Hamadan a force of 600 troops was raised composed of one squadron of Cavalry and two companies of Infantry under the command of six British officers and the usual number of native officers. The formation of a smaller body was undertaken later at Kazvin. In order to form a screen protecting the main road to Enzeli, small parties of officers were sent to Bijar about 100 miles NW of Hamadan and to Zinjan about 100 miles NW of Kazvin. These parties raised a number of levies, of little value it must be confessed, but whose very existence considerably widened the sphere of British influence and had a considerable moral effect in holding off attacks of small bodies of Turks advancing from the direction of Tabriz.

One factor which had a considerable effect in securing the safety of the British at this time was the presence of a number of Russian soldiers who had not yet succeeded in returning home. They hated and were hated by the native and bore no particular love from the British. The native population seems to have had the feeling that if the British were attacked, the Russians might take the side of the white man. The Russian troops, with the exception of Bicherakov’s Cossacks were totally disorganised and infected with Bolshevism – they appear to have had no reasons for being Bolshevik rather than Menshevik - they adopted it, evidently, because it was the fashion of the hour, and the most favorable doctrine to secure their return home. The political views of the Russian soldier – and political views alone mattered – were somewhat as follows: - “Formerly we were ill-treated and oppressed. Then came the Revolution. Now we are free but unfortunately we

are also ignorant. We don't know how to rule ourselves. I accept what the last speaker says. I want to go home. Kazian, the exit from this benighted country is in the hands of the Bolshevik, therefore I am a Bolshevik". Such men as these were the menace rather than an assistance to the British for any suspicion of an alliance between Briton and Russian caused the Persian to project the justly arose suspicion which he entertained for the latter, on to the former as well. The Cossacks of Bicherakov though to some extent affected with Bolshevism, and anxious to return home, were more useful allies. They were under some sort of discipline and were fairly efficient. Every assistance possible was afforded the unattached Russians to leave the country and General Dunsterville persuaded Colonel Bicherakov, by promises of future help in the Caucasus and by advances for the payment permit of his troops, to remain in Persia until the whole of the Dunsterforce had arrived, together with a few companies of the 39th Infantry Brigade, part of which eventually reached Baku and took place in the operations there.

The activities of the Dunsterforce in famine relief, the establishment of an efficient intelligence system, the raising of levies, the capture of many enemy agents and the restoration of a semblance of law and order, build up a strong British position in Central Persia.

As soon as Kermanshah and Hamadan and the district surrounding these towns had been made fairly secure, small groups of officers were sent to Kazvin further to the North. It was necessary for the first gradually to win its ways northward through the country to make safe the line of communication which had to be established between Enzeli and Baghdad, so that once the opportunity of getting officers implanted in Baku should arrive, there should be no delay in organising a force to cut off Turk and German from the Caspian and the Krasnovodsk-Bokhara railway.

At Kazvin activities similar to those pursued with such success further south were again employed and with similar results. The favourable reports already received concerning "the English" made the task less arduous than at Hamadan. The great opposition met within the Kazvin area was from the Jungalis and their leader Kuchik-Khan.

The Jungalis as their name implies are a forest tribe inhabiting the province of Gilan. Their capital is the rather picturesque town of Resht. The country is densely covered and affords a delightful prospect when contrasted with the rest of Persia which is generally arid and treeless, except where irrigated. For the last 70 miles of its length the road from Kazvin the only method of approach - winds through the forest, sometimes along precipices and at times along the sides of streams often most dry but which might quickly become raging torrents. At least twenty points on the road can be defended by a few resolute men against enormously greater numbers. At one spot called Menzil, near the entrance to the Gilan country, there is a position offering very great difficulties to an attacking force - here the winding road is very narrow and is cut out of solid rock; on the right (going northward) is a sheer descent into a river; on the left are mountains giving everywhere excellent cover and here and there affording splendid field of fire for any number of defenders.

The Jungalis themselves had suffered less from famine than most other parts of Persia and on account of the inaccessible nature of their country and the fact that it lay within the old Russian "sphere of influence" had not suffered to any great extent from the depredations of the Russians. Though the people were inhabitants of the forest, they are by no means wild and war-like. They are hardly more virile than the rest of the Persians, but still had become the backbone of the Democratic Movement.

Their leader, Kuchik-Khan was undoubtedly a patriot, though a dreamer striving earnestly for the welfare of his country. His ideals of liberty, fraternity, and equality and confusion to all

foreigners. His people ardently hated the Russians but at the outbreak of the Revolution this hatred was temporarily laid aside on account of the Socialistic views of both peoples. Kuchik appointed a committee to assist him in the government of the country. Soon the committee governed Kuchik and eagerly received German gold and the German officers who reorganised and led the Jungali troops. Being Mahommedans the latter were favorably disposed towards the Turks.

The motives which actuated the Jungalis were, in reality, not so much the local Monroe Doctrine, as German gold and Mahommedan religion. They were in close touch with the democrats of other provinces and cities including the capital and had the sympathy of many leading civil officials. The Central Government possessed no reliable fighting force and it seemed likely at one time that Kuchik-Khan might easily overthrow the cabinet of the Shah, and establish a revolutionary Government at Tehran. Kuchik-Khan failed to act at a critical moment, and a grave danger to the British was averted.

As has been stated, there was a considerable amount of sympathy between the Gelanis and the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks were anti British chiefly because the British Government would not recognize them as the Government of Russia. The Gelanis were also hostile to the British because they feared that the latter would take the place of the departing Russians and would prolong the war. Thus at Kazvin, Resht and Enzeli, the Dunsterforce always was opposed by a Bolshevik-Jungali combine.

The passage of the disorganized Russians homewards along the forest road was expedited by Kuchik and with the advice of his German officers he also offered to assist Bicherakov, provided the latter renounced all connection with the English – a proposal which was scornfully rejected.

It is estimated that the province of Gilan had available about 5000 Infantry well provided with Turkish machine guns and large quantities of Russian and Turkish rifles and ammunition, as well as a variety of their own antiquated and inaccurate weapons of frightfulness. They had had no field guns or cavalry. Their German leaders impressed upon them that they had nothing at all to fear from the British; who, they said, were extremely cowardly and would never withstand the onslaught of the patriots fighting on behalf of their native land. It is true that the Dunsterforce used every possible means to avoid conflict with the Jungalis - not from motives such as the Germans imputed – but because there was nothing to be gained by fighting a tribe with whom we were not very much concerned. We had no great interest in their domestic affairs. All that was desired was an unimpeded passage through their country and the release of certain officers whom they had captured and imprisoned. Lengthy negotiations produced no useful results and so the assistance of Bicherakov was obtained in order to force a way through.

In June 4th [Kuchik-Khan](#) with his force was occupying the strong defensive position at Menzil. He was well provided with machine guns and ammunition, and his 5000 infantry occupying well sighted trenches should have been sufficiently numerous to resist a division.

Bicherakov's brigade was a composite force of all arms consisting of Infantry, Cavalry and a section of field guns. To this brigade were attached a few officers and NCOs of the Dunsterforce, several armored cars and two aeroplanes. An important point of the Menzil position was a spur running out from the mountains causing the road to make a hair pin bend. On the approach of Bicherakov's infantry the Jungalis occupying this position turned and fled. When the artillery opened fire on the hill entrenchments to the west of the road there was noticed, first of all individuals moving towards the rear, and then parties of 5 or 6 departing with unseemly haste. The aeroplanes machine gunned the entrenchments causing great consternation. The Cossack infantry then attacked and in a couple of hours the position was in the hands of Bicherakov. The

losses of the attackers were very slight. The defenders became totally disorganized and abandoned the greater part of their machine guns and ammunition and disappeared into the forest.

From this time it became possible for Ford vans carrying troops and supplies, even without armored car escort, from Menzil to Enzeli. Two companies of 4th, 1/2nd Gurkhas and a Company of the 1/4th Hampshire Regiment brought up from Mesopotamia, were sent as a small garrison to Resht. Kuchik-Khan ordered his followers to raid isolated parties of the cowardly English. These isolated attacks were never carried out with great determination and casualties were almost negligible. After experiences such as met with on the Somme, at Bullecourt, "East of Ipres" this type of warfare was highly diverting.

A rather serious attack on the British garrison at Resht was made at dawn on the 20th of July. A party of about 400 British in buildings on the outskirts of the town, was attacked by 1200 Jungalis led, or rather urged on, by their German instructors. The assault was beaten off with considerable loss to the attackers. Another small party of 19 rifles was guarding the local branch of the Imperial Bank of Persia (Headquarters in London). As the forest runs right up to the outer houses of the town, the balance of the Jungalis not engaged in the attack on the main body of the British, took possession of the narrow streets and tried to seize the Bank. The defenders managed to hold out until they were relieved by an excellent piece of work on the part of the Gurkhas who, after the failure of the main attack, had adopted an offensive role. Eventually after three days fighting in which aeroplanes effectively co-operated, the Jungali troops were forced to leave the town. An interesting feature of this fighting is the fear inspired by the Gurkhas who are regarded by the native as superior to English troops on account of the dire effects of the Indian *kukhri* (a decapitating weapon). From this time onward no opposition was experienced from the Jungalis and eventually peace was made. Kuchik-Khan agreed to forego hostile propaganda, dismissed his German officers and allowed the British to pass unmolested through his country.

The events mentioned have been described in a certain sequence and without detail in order to make an exceedingly brief account, as clear as possible, but it must not be supposed that the undivided efforts of the Dunsterforce were directed towards reaching Baku. Unfortunately that was not possible. Several other important problems arose and the following degeneration touches on a tragedy which when described in writing loses its significance, but which in reality represented every type of horror.

To the south and west of Lake Urmieh where two Christian communities consisting of Assyrians, whose tribal name is Jilus, and Armenians. These people combined numbered about 80000. After the Caucasian army melted away these people were surrounded by two Turkish divisions and very hard pressed. They nevertheless put up an excellent fight against great odds, and actually won several victories. They did not yield through fear of massacre and because they hoped that the British would be able to send them assistance.

The Turk held the country south of Lake Urmieh as far as Sakhiz. The country between Sakhiz and Bijar is inhabited by wild tribes of Kurds with a genuine reputation of valour and warlike instincts. The Turks tried to secure levies from these tribes. We endeavored to do the same and the result was a stalemate. Thus, the Christians were surrounded not only by Turks but also on the south by tribes of warlike Kurds.

The Jilus succeeded in getting a messenger to the Dunsterforce at Bijar asking for rifles ammunition and money. A reply was sent by aeroplane to the effect that rifles and ammunition would be sent to Sain Kaleh and the Jilus and Armenians were requested to force a way through

the surrounding Turks and meet a squadron of cavalry at Sain Kalekh bringing the rifles and ammunition. This they succeeded in doing.

Their commander-in-chief, however, made the fatal mistake of sending on the expedition too great a proportion of his fighting man. Rumors were circulating by the enemy agents in Urmieh that the whole force had been slaughtered. These reports were believed. At this juncture the whole population seems to have become panic-stricken and with their cattle and belongings made a wild stampede in the direction of Bijar and thence into Persia to place themselves under the protection of the British.

They were hopelessly disorganized and without provisions and protection. Those who were mounted (on oxen, horses, or mules or donkeys) traveled fastest. The courageous spirit hitherto displayed by their fighting men, seemed to have disappeared when the whole population formed a fleeing rabble. No help was afforded the old men, women and children – many died by the roadside. The road followed was for weeks afterwards distinguishable on account of dead bodies. The soldiers among them put up no resistance and were always well to the front, ready to plunder Kurdish villages passed on the way. The angry Kurds followed in the rear of the column destroying the helpless.

A mounted party of about twelve officers and NCOs with three Lewis guns was sent to their assistance. The party was far too small but no larger force was available and they could only bring a few thousand pounds of flour to give the starving fugitives. The officer in charge was Captain [Stanley Savage](#) DSO, MC, of the 24th Australian Infantry Battalion and he and his officers and NCOs performed exploits of which Australia may well be proud. As the refugees moved along Savage and his men remained on their rear, so far as their numbers would allow, covered the retirement from day to day. He inflicted numerous casualties on pursuing Kurds and Turks and succeeded in saving of hundreds of inoffensive people from massacre.

In this disastrous flight from 20000 to 25000 Armenians and Jilus met their fate. When the fugitives arrived in the neighborhood of Hamadan they were divided into their tribes and rationed. The strong men were enlisted to form levies, and a labour corps; the remainder was brought to Mesopotamia and encamped there. As soon as the armistice was made with the Turkey, they were repatriated.

After the defeat of Kuchik-Khan no further opposition was experienced in Persia. The port and town of Enzeli which in February had been extremely hostile were by June distinctly pro-British. This was due to the failure of the opposition of Kuchik-Khan, the favourable reports received of the newcomers from further south and the decline in the influence of Bolsheviks.

Three transports were secured at Enzeli – the *Abo*, the *Kursk* and the *President Krueger*. These were subsequently used for the transport of supplies, munitions and troops to Baku. At this point it may fairly be said that the British were undoubtedly masters of the northern half of the Country. A strong position had in few months been built up in spite of difficulties of every description – bad roads, an unhealthy climate in which typhus and cholera were prevalent, hostility of Persians and Gelanis, Bolshevik propaganda, shortage of food, and shortage of the petrol needed for transport on the 600 miles of road between Baghdad and Enzeli. An effort will now be made to show how the second half of the program of the Dunsterforce was carried out, that is, the defense of Baku.

The Armenian National Council at Baku was desirous of securing our aid – the Bolsheviks there refused to have anything to do with the British. The struggling bodies of ex-soldiers who had returned from Persia were disarmed, but this led to a considerable amount of street fighting during which, large parts of the Tartar quarter were destroyed. Politically the strength of the Armenians at Baku lay in the fact that they were totally opposed to Turkish occupation of the city. The Bolsheviks on the other hand, were not unfavorably disposed towards the Turks. The Turkish question had become very serious by the end of June – 12000 of their troops, – half regulars and half levies, were advancing along the trans-Caucasian railway from Tiflis. Their advance however,

was slow because the railway was in a bad state of repair, there was a shortage of rolling stock, and furthermore the Germans in Tiflis were not anxious for the Turks to gain possession of the city.

The Armenians had every reason to suppose that the latter would succeed in their object unless the Bolshevik government were overthrown. They accordingly effected a coup d'état and overthrew the government establishing in its place a government headed by 5 "Dictators". Thirteen shiploads of Bolsheviks left the city and sailed for Astrakhan, taking all the guns and munitions they could seize. The ships were pursued by two gunboats, brought back, and the munitions landed. The personnel was then allowed to proceed to Astrakhan.

Bicherakov had previously taken his force to Baku and prepared to take part in the defence of the city. He had been given the rank of Major General and the command of all the local troops which was known as the Red Army. In spite of his promotion and imposing title he never had great influence in the city and the "Dictators" intended to use him to gain their own ends – a fact which he was not slow to recognize.

He newly appointed *Dictators* asked for the assistance of the *Dunsterforce* and all available troops. General Dunsterville willingly granted their request but pointed out that the troops at his disposal were not sufficient for the defense of the town and that the Baku troops were largely responsible for their own salvation. Drafts of troops were only received gradually and never exceeded a battalion at full strength.

The city had a population of about 300,000 composed of Russians, Tartars and Armenians and also a few Georgians and Greeks. The houses are many (sic) of them magnificent structures built in European style. The large Russian Cathedral in the centre of the town is very picturesque. The streets are generally fairly wide and in peace time must have been well kept. They are paved with cobble stones and there was formerly an efficient tram service. The city is situated in a large hollow with ground gradually rising to a line of cliffs to the north and east. The country in the neighborhood is barren except where very beautiful rows of trees have been planted. There are three chief groups of oil wells at Bibi Eibat, Balakhani and at Binagadi. The crude oil is refined at what is known as Black town where there are also large oil and petrol reservoirs.

The civil government was very weak. Although a large number of Bolsheviks had left the town, many remained, and apart from this every department was run by committees. The numbers of these bodies were rarely specialists and as a result wasted enormous amount of time in discussing and passing resolutions when they should have been acting. Even when resolutions were passed there was no authority to ensure that they would be carried out. The majority of the citizens were tired of the continued disorder, and were prepared to support any scheme likely to give stability and security. It has been well said that "revolutionaries are quite the least brotherly people towards each other that the world contains, and constitute a living refutation of their fundamental doctrines". A remarkable fact is that the Bolsheviks strongly anti-British before our arrival, became some of our strongest supporters – evidently because we were found to be reliable and represented money and armed strength.

Food was scarce and prices were high. Everything had been nationalised and there was no inducement for private merchants to import foodstuffs. A very frugal meal in a hotel cost somewhere in the neighborhood of two pounds at the current rate of exchange. In addition to the scarcity, the method of distribution among the civil population seems to have been bad. Methods such as the methods of the civil government and the food supply and the economic position of the town have been mentioned not because they are at all interesting, but because they always have considerable influence on the situation in a besieged town.

At the time the British arrived the length of line held by the defenders was about 21,000 yards. The left flank touched the sea from which a cliff running northwards for about seven miles was held. Thence the cliff turned inwards to the defenses but the line was continued northwards for

about another three miles to a hill called Dirty Vulcan. From there it turned eastwards to Binagadi village and to Diga. The right flank of the defence rested at a salt lake about three quarters of a mile north-east of Diga. The line was far too close to the town and should have run directly north and south across the peninsula. The front was not wired, the trenches were far too shallow and neither communication, support or reserve trenches existed at all. The infantry numbered about 6000 and were divided into 22 battalions ranging in strength from 150 to 250 men. The battalions were not organized, the food and ammunition supply was poor and there were few local officers of experience. There were a few squadrons of cavalry, and a number of batteries ranging in size from the mountain guns to 5-inch field guns. These were mostly antiquated and of various patterns.



Shortly before the Turkish attack on Baku: above- Russian and Armenian soldiers near the front line; below - training of local troops (photos from the Collection of Australian War Memorial)

The deplorable nature of the defenses was an indication of the worth of the troops. The most reliable of them were Russians but there was no discipline whatever. There were committees. The committees frequently could not get their orders carried out. The officers had no authority. The writer once asked a Russian soldier why he had not carried out an order given him by his

Russian officer. His reply was "Why should I do what he tells me? He is just a private soldier like myself and I don't think that what he says is a good plan". It might have been expected that the Armenian soldiers would have been models of determination and courage. They were neither. In the course of conversation they used to say: "Yes, you are right. If we don't hold this line the Turk will soon be in the town, slaughtering our wives and children. We will defend this position to the last" -brave words which were never fulfilled by acts. When an attack developed all protestations would be forgotten. They would fade away to the rear leaving their machine guns in the hands of the enemy. Frequently a soldier regarded the machine gun which he was supposed to work, as his own personal property, and when he felt inclined to do so, would return to the city taking the gun with him.

Their leaders were hardly superior in martial qualities to the rank and file though there were a few really efficient and enthusiastic officers among them. The following is an illustration of the sort of army we were obliged to work with and assist. "I received" says General Dunsterville, "an invitation from the Russian commander in chief to be present at 8 p.m. at a Council of War. I replied that I was not in favor of such councils, but if it was decided to hold one, I should be glad to be present. I found the Commander in Chief at the central table with maps spread before him and he offered me a seat at his side. The entire room was filled with the members of the various committees. The Armenian National Council was there in full force, the five Dictators, Workmen's delegates, Soldiers' and Sailors' delegates, and Peasant Deputies. It did not appear likely that a Council of War held on these lines was going to achieve anything useful. The proceeding commenced by the General giving a very clear but lengthy appreciation of the situation, his remarks being punctuated by interpolations of assent or disapproval from the members of the various committees. He was, however, permitted to conclude his address without serious interruption and summed up his remarks by saying "The enemy have taken A and B and will probably next move on to C which will make D untenable. I therefore propose that we alter the whole line as follows".

Before the concluding remarks were out of his mouth a burly sailor strode up to the table to give his views on the situation. He made use of the General's map indicating points as required by the use of his broad thumb, oblivious of the fact that his thumb covered more than a square mile of country, leaving some of his points rather vague. He spoke for an hour with obvious enjoyment, repeating himself a good deal and wandering off the track every now and then to work in some very well worn tag or to give vent to some such sentiment as "we will fight to the very last drop of our blood" which produced vociferous applause. He eventually arrived in the approved manner, at his summing up, which was the exact contrary of that of the commander in chief, and he suggested plans of action which were quite the reverse of those outlined by the commander in chief, and urged the taking up of a line totally different.

His final peroration was to the following effect: "The general says the Turks are holding such and such points. That is not so, the line runs thus (describing the enemy's imaginary line with considerable detail). He says we have had to give up B. That is not so. I have just had a telephone message from a friend of mine out there. The General says we must take up such and such a line. He is quite wrong. That is not the line to take up. This is the one (more detail). His Counsel is not that of a brave man. We mean to fight to the bitter end & c". To my surprise the general in no way resented this amateur interference with his plans, in fact he seemed to think there was a good deal in what the sailor said. When the speaker reluctantly resumed his seat, the Armenian National Council had their say, proposing plans neither agreeing with those of the commander in chief, nor with those of the sailor. After them the *Dictators* had quite a fresh plan to propose, differing from all the others. The *Dictators* were followed by other speakers each with his own views to put forward and each inspired by a desire to continue talking so long as his breath held out.

So time went on until the clock struck one and my patience was exhausted. How long the meeting continued I do not know but having decided that it was quite time for my stuff and myself to be in bed, I apologized quietly to my commander in chief and withdrew, leaving the assembly to continue their futile discussions. All this is rather amusing but it is pathetic when one remembers that warfare conducted on such lines contributed to the death of gallant British soldiers.

The Turks at this time were occupying a line in most places about 2,000 yards distant. It is not known definitely what troops were at their disposal but were probably in the neighbourhood of 10000 including cavalry and artillery. Some of their regiments were fairly good but they had a large number of levies who were unreliable. A large number of Tartars from the city itself and from the surrounding villages had joined the Turks, and though they were mostly civilians, they were of considerable use on account of their knowledge of the locality. It is certain that there were numerous enemy agents within the city, who could easily get through the lines and it probable that they had direct telephone communication to the Turkish forces.

Bicherakov had arrived in the city three weeks before the British; after taking part in a series of engagements in which he had been worsted through the work of co-operation and determination of the part of the "Red Army", he withdrew his detachment to Derbent 100 miles further to the North.

There is one noteworthy event in the series of depressing and futile operations in which alone the Armenians displayed a little enthusiasm and aggressiveness. On July 30th "the Red Army", i.e. the local troops, and the Cossacks had been driven back some distance leaving the enemy in possession of the heights above the town, and within 3000 yards of the wharves. A rumour spread among the Turks to the effect that a large cavalry force had appeared in their rear. They commenced to retire. The Armenians pursued with considerable vigour and regained the important positions they had lost, but instead of "digging in" the majority of them returned to the town to stroll round the promenades and relate to admiring lady friends their gallant deeds.

The withdrawal of Bicherakhov left a gap in the extreme right of the defences and this gap was never filled. The local authorities complained bitterly of this action but had done nothing to fill this gap during the three weeks which had elapsed prior to the arrival of the British. Bicherakov was concerned more with the security of his own force than the safety of the city, that the withdrawal was a great mistake and really sealed the fate of the city. If he had remained the town would never have fallen.

The British force of approximately 1000 men consisting of detachment of the 9th North Staffords, the 9th Worcesters, and the 9th Royal Warwicks and the 8th Battery RFA took over various parts of the line. In order to maintain the moral of the defenders these detachments had to be split up to hold various parts of the front line. The whole of these English troops should have been kept as a general reserve for purposes of counter attack, but to this plan the Russian staff would never agree.

Fourteen officers of the Dunsterforce were attached to local units. Six of these were artillery officers and were given command of local batteries. They produced a considerable amount of improvement in the shooting and general efficiency of the personnel. The men became more soldierly and learnt a good deal about their job and became devoted to their English leaders. The local artillery through the instructional work of these few officers, and the more general organising work of two officers of the Headquarters Staff of the *Dunsterforce*, became quite the most efficient arm of the Service.

The eight Infantry officers were attached as "assistant commanders" to local battalions and brigades of infantry. It is due to their efforts that the greater part of the front was wired. Their units dug improved front line trenches organised into systems and also many communication trenches. Good machine gun positions were constructed and our headquarters in Baku had all available machine guns sought out and distributed to units. The number of officers available for such work was far too small. Frequently an officer found himself responsible for a mile of front line, and the supervision of all work was being carried on, was a matter of some difficulty. The local officers were willing enough to co-operate but they had little authority over their men. To get work done such as the digging of satisfactory machine gun emplacements, required constant patience and energy. The Russian has an unfortunate habit of "letting everything slide".

The following is typical of the kind of work which had to be done: "On going round the line I find a machine gun in an impossible position. I interview the Commanding Officer and persuade him to move it to So and So to-night. I then search out the officer in charge of the gun and after a few polite, and, as far as possible, cheerful remarks say - "This machine gun is useless here because _____. Tonight I would like you to move it to such and such position". The officer decides that the proposed position would be excellent and agrees to move it that very night. In order to make sure that the matter won't be forgotten I see the machine gun crew and tell them the gun is to [be] moved to _____ to-night. In my inexperience I at first expect that the instructions will be carried out. Next day I find that for some childish reason, nothing has been done and if I want particularly to have that gun moved, I have to go along at an appointed hour, collect the gun, officer and crew, mark out the emplacement, and stay until the job is done. There is a good deal of unnecessary work attached to this sort of thing and even though I have to hasten of a quantity of other work as well, I receive but little assistance".

Still, the defences and the bearing of the troops in a short time showed considerable improvement, and if the final Turkish attack had been delivered three weeks later, after the re-organisation of the defenders had been completed and the line further strengthened we should have been able, without doubt, to save the city.

It is not possible to give a complete account of the operations of the various units raised in Baku. It is unlikely that any person living is in a position to describe the complete operations of any Russo-Armenian Brigade – not even the Brigade or Divisional Commanders. Orders were always issued in the approved manner, but frequently units failed to reach their destination and counter attacks which were planned are known in some cases never to have materialised through cowardice or disobedience on the part of those detailed to carry them out. The British troops fared badly on account of becoming dangerously exposed because of failures on the part of their allies, or because the latter did not support them when a crisis arose.

On August 26 about 1000 of the enemy attacked Dirty Vulcan which was held by D Coy of the 9th North Staffords. The casualties of this company were very heavy and they were eventually obliged to withdraw about 400 yards; succeeded in forming another line and held up the enemy. The 9th North Staffordshire Regiment during this and subsequent operations served with great distinction. On August 31st the Turks attacked and captured Binagadi Hill which was held by one company of British. The Armenians in reserve at Binagadi village, not only failed to give support, but even drifted towards the rear. Once more the English casualties were heavy and the only consolation which remains is that the enemy suffered much more heavily. A final general attack was delivered by the enemy on 14th September. Information was received of their intentions about 36 hours previously from an Arab deserter. Suitable dispositions were made through the line but only one company of the British were withdrawn from the forward area to form a dependable general reserve. The chief attack was delivered at dawn at Wolfes Gap - naturally a strong defensive position about 500 yards from the extreme left flank, and held by the Red Army, - and also at Beladjari village held by the Worcesters and an Armenian unit. Holding attacks were also delivered at other points of the line and had a rather demoralising effect on the local units concerned. The troops at the Wolfes Gap put up no resistance whatever. A regiment of cavalry penetrated the breach in that line and reaching the plateau above the city, caused havoc among the artillery. By 8 a.m. the enemy were in possession of the houses on the eastern outskirts of the town. The Worcesters beat off the attack opposite them and later were almost surrounded on account of the retirement of the local troops on their right flank. They were saved from annihilation by withdrawing on to the high ground nearer the town.

The great part of the "Red Army" put up a feeble resistance and in some cases bolted for Baku. The regiment in the neighbourhood of Beladjari Station – a unit of about 1200 Russians and Armenians – beat off all enemy attacks, delivered a partly successful counter attack to help the regiment on its left and was with difficulty withdrawn to new line after having been almost surrounded. This was the only praiseworthy achievement which the citizen army can claim.

The British company in general reserve delivered, in the direction of Wolfes Gap, a counter attack of which any Englishman may well be proud; but perhaps the prospect of about 120 men without artillery support, advancing against 2000 well armed enemies is pathetic rather than glorious! The company suffered a large proportion of casualties but created a diversion which delayed the Turks in entering the city. Counterattacks delivered by Russians had little effect and by 4 p.m. it was obvious that the city was doomed. The troops were everywhere in disorder and dispirited. Most of their machine guns had been lost and in addition numerous field guns had been destroyed. The Dictators had begun to discuss surrender (the terms of which were agreed upon the following day).

General Dunsterville then decided to withdraw his troops, regarding further defence as futile. (The accuracy of this view is controversial as there was the possibility of withdrawing what was left of the tired British troops, bringing them and committing them to a final counterattack). The wounded were safely placed on board a transport and at about 8 p.m. the British Infantry together with the 8th Battery RFA. and its guns were marched on to the *Kursk* and *President Krueger* which were waiting in readiness. By a continuation of good fortune and good management the surviving *Dunsterforce* officers attached to local units, were also notified of the intended departure and – with the exception of one officer and one sergeant who escaped with refugees to Krasnovodsk - embarked. The transports succeeded in eluding the guardships stationed at the entrance of the harbour and by 6 p.m. of the 5th of September had reached Enzeli.

On the conclusion of the Armistice with Turkey, the *Dunsterforce* was disbanded. In conjunction with the 39th Brigade they had established a favourable reputation for British soldiers – a reputation which was long endured in these regions. The following copy of the resolution of the crew of the “Kursk” gives some idea of public opinion at the time: “We, the committee of the crew of the s.s. “Kursk” have witnessed with intense admiration the heroic conduct of your brave British soldiers in the defence of Baku. We have seen them suffering wounds and death bravely in defence of our town which our own people were too feeble to defend. It is wonderful to us that these fine fellows from that distant island in the North Sea should have come all this way to the Caspian and should have given up their lives there in the cause of honour and glory. We are so impressed by their bearing, daring and valour and by the whole episode of the British endeavours to save Baku from the Turks, that we wish to be at once taken over as a body and granted British nationality”.