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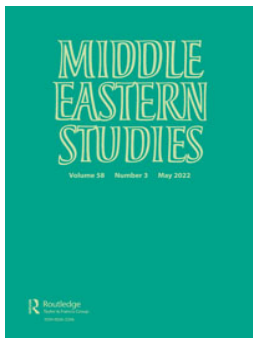
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'A man on a watchtower': Malleson and the British military mission to Turkistan, 1918–20

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It is not often that one comes across a former British intelligence chief venting his spleen in public about past injustices done to him by his government and, in doing so, revealing recent intelligence operations. One such instructive example is that of Major-General Sir Wilfrid Malleson who, on 24 January 1922, in a lecture to the Central Asian Society (CAS, chaired by a former permanent head of the foreign office, Lord Carnock), castigated the British government of India for failing to recognise the admittedly impressive services of the personnel of the British military mission to Turkestan from 1918–20, which had been under his command. In his righteous fury, Malleson revealed to a large extent British military and intelligence operations in the region, particularly as they affected Afghanistan in the critical years of 1919–20, covering as they did the Third Afghan War and its aftermath. A direct man, with strong convictions, Malleson had no qualms in exposing what he saw as the fatal mistakes made by the government of India, not only towards Afghanistan, but towards the ever-shifting scene in the former Tsarist territories of Central Asia. In doing so, he had no hesitation in playing up his own mission's intelligence coups. It was no less than a public revenge for the government of India's perceived slight on his reputation. But it is more than this in the sense that he was voicing his frustration at years of unnecessary restrictions on his ability to carry out his tasks as a former head of Indian Army intelligence. In investigating the background to Malleson's revelations, one is fortunate to have access to his extensive reports from his base at Meshed in the Khorasan province of Persia which were passed through the government of India to the India Office in London. These reports were neatly summarised in a series of memoranda for its use by the India Office. These memoranda also include material from other secret sources, especially the intercepts of Bolshevik wireless messages between Tashkent, the military bases in Turkestan and 'the Centre' in Moscow. Thus, it is possible to acquire a snapshot at a critical time of the British intelligence network in Central Asia and the means by which intelligence was collected, evaluated and distributed to its 'customers' in India and London. There is evidence that it helped determine policy at the highest level, namely the inter-departmental conference on middle eastern affairs which reported to the British cabinet. Historians have tended to neglect this episode, preferring to concentrate on the period of active military operations by Malleson's mission in Transcaspia from September 1918 to April 1919, when it withdrew to its base at Meshed. However, as Malleson argued in his lecture, 'undoubtedly the most important and interesting task of the Mission' occurred in the following twelve months from April 1919 to May 1920, at which date Malleson was replaced as head of the mission.¹ He left under somewhat of a cloud and it is clear that this rankled with him and helps explain his moment of revenge in front of a select audience at the Central Asian Society several years later. It is proposed in this article to concentrate on an examination of British military intelligence operations in Central Asia in this later period from 1919–20 since

it has been comparatively neglected and has much to tell us about the nature of British intelligence in this period and place.

Malleson and Central Asia

Malleson's background was in Indian army intelligence. He had been instrumental in the formation of the nucleus of an intelligence corps in India in 1904-5 for intelligence gathering beyond the frontiers of India. It was initially to comprise twenty men, with native officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs), under a British officer. The men were to be recruited into the Guides regiment from the trans-frontier and Central Asian tribes. In addition, the many Afghan, Central Asian and Indian traders who travelled to and from India through Afghanistan each year were to be tapped for information. Malleson's initiative was approved by the foreign department of the government of India and the viceroy, Lord Curzon.² It was also supported by the commander-in-chief, Lord Kitchener. He wanted intelligence on the state of preparedness of the Russian armed forces in Central Asia since he was preparing the Indian army for a possible war against Russia in Afghanistan. The urgency of the situation declined with the defeat of Russia by Japan in 1905 and the advent of the Anglo-Russian entente in 1907. However, Malleson continued to monitor Russian military activity in Central Asia, and further afield, as well as the situation on the Afghan frontier. This involved running intelligence agents on and beyond the frontiers. Also, he tracked the Muscat arms traffic to the Mekran coast of Persia and onwards to Baluchistan and Afghanistan, and to the tribes along the north-west frontier of India. He toured the Persian Gulf and Turkish Arabia (Mesopotamia) in 1906 and the following year ventured into the Khyber Hills.³ Malleson served as assistant quartermaster-general in the intelligence branch of the chief of staff's division from 1906-8. Malleson was to draw on this experience of intelligence-gathering when he was appointed in 1918 to lead his mission to Meshed. His only experience of active military command was in East Africa in 1915-16 and it was to show that his talents lay in the arcane arts of intelligence work rather than as a fighting soldier. Sensibly, he was to leave this to his more able commanders in Transcaspia.

Malleson the man was later described by one of his intelligence officers as having a reputation for being 'obstinate, unsociable, wrapped up in his own work and meticulous in the extreme'. His views were 'frequently unorthodox and critical of authority, and even cynical. One sensed that he felt his own merits had not received due recognition.'⁴ Another thought Malleson's 'main quality lay in his cleverness at picking people's brains and turning to advantage the work of others. This had been his reputation before and it was certainly substantiated during his command in Meshed and Transcaspia.'⁵

Malleson was appointed in June 1918 to head a mission to Turkestan which was to be based in Meshed, in the Khorasan province of Persia. As Malleson later related, 'The object of the mission was to check as far as possible the Turkish and German designs to penetrate, via Baku and Krasnovodsk, with the active assistance or tacit consent of the Bolsheviks then in control of Turkistan, to the Afghan frontier, where their object was to bring pressure to bear on Afghans and tribesmen alike to embark on a religious war against the British in India.'⁶ The government of India at Simla was very anxious about this threat at a time when Britain was on the defensive against Germany and the Ottoman Empire from France to Central Asia. The Malleson mission (designated 'Malmiss') was just one of the steps taken to counter the critical situation. Another mission was sent to Kashgar, comprising Colonel F. M. Bailey, Major P.T. Etherton and Captain L.V.S. Blacker. Malleson does not seem to have known that the viceroy, Lord Chelmsford, and some India Office officials, such as John Shuckburgh, the head of the political department, were against the despatch of these missions to Central Asia. It was the War Office and the secretary of state for India, Edwin Montagu, who insisted on it in the eastern committee of the Cabinet. The missions were initially intended to be passive and informational. They were to stay in

Meshed and Kashgar. The newly-arrived officers in Meshed were very critical of the existing intelligence efforts. One, Reginald Teague Jones, found that the consul-general, the 'nervy' Lt.-Colonel Grey, and his 'irritable' military attaché, Colonel Redl, had no real knowledge of what was happening across the frontier in Transcaspia since they had only a rudimentary intelligence network there.⁷ This was later confirmed by Malleson who, in his CAS lecture, stated that, 'Intelligence cannot well be improvised. It needs to be slowly built up. But we started with nothing beyond a few agents and ended with a great deal. The organisation of this system was splendidly carried out by certain officers of my mission.'⁸ They spoke numerous languages and had agents up to 1000 miles away, even in the offices of the Bolshevik government in Tashkent. They had relays of agents going to and from, often by the railway, the areas of interest, and also gathered information from travellers. Considerable leeway was given by London to local initiative to take what steps were necessary to counter Turco-German propaganda and aggressive enemy operations against British India and in Central Asia. This enabled Etherton at Kashgar and Malleson at Meshed to take active measures in Central Asia. While Colonel Bailey and Captain Blacker left Kashgar for Tashkent to discover more about the Bolshevik government there, Malleson concluded an agreement in August 1918 with the Menshevik Turkestan Union government in Transcaspia, which had overthrown its Bolshevik predecessor. Malleson agreed to defend Baku and Krasnovodsk against the Turks and Germans and provide subsidies on condition the Askhabad government of railwaymen agreed to use its authority to take the Transcaspien railway out of commission if necessary. Thus, the Malleson mission moved from being passive and informational in countering the Turks and Germans to being active and anti-Bolshevik. In order to underline this Malleson moved Indian troops from the East Persian cordon to Transcaspia, where they bolstered the Menshevik forces and Turcoman cavalry and fought a series of successful military actions against Bolshevik troops moving up the railway towards Askhabad. Malleson knew that this constituted an act of war against the Bolsheviks, though he was uncertain whether Simla/Delhi realised this and whether it was in accord with the policy of the British government. Nevertheless, he went ahead with it.

The question arises as to whether Malleson had become a loose cannon, pursuing too independent a policy in Central Asia, to which he was trying to commit the government of India. Several observers have concluded that Malleson wanted to encourage the establishment of a separate Muslim state or federation of states which would be supported and influenced by Britain.⁹ Certainly, he made much of the pro-British declarations of the Turcomans who apparently clamoured to become part of the British Empire. It has also been noted that Malleson later sent arms to the Amir of Bokhara to encourage opposition to the Bolsheviks. Malleson later took pleasure in his triumph in playing off Simla/Delhi against London to winter his forces in Merv (where his officers could stay in comfortable quarters in the Tsar's summer palace). But it has been observed that he used this opportunity to advocate a military advance to the Syr Darya/Oxus, and the creation of a secure frontier for the Askhabad government. This proved too much for the viceroy who refused to sanction such an advance and was successful in convincing the India Office, the Foreign Office and the Inter-Departmental Conference on Middle Eastern Affairs (IDCMEA, the successor to the eastern committee) in London that Malleson's forces should be withdrawn from Transcaspia. Edwin Montagu, the secretary of state for India, had reversed his position on Malmiss. In endorsing the withdrawal, Montagu was scathing about Malleson's demand for more money for his forces. 'Who were the enemy against whom this force was being maintained? The only possible enemy were the Bolsheviks, but what harm could they do in those regions? How could there be any danger of Bolshevik penetration in Persia and Afghanistan.'¹⁰ Given the revelations of his own department about the subversive activities and aims of the Bolsheviks towards India, this must rank as one of the great understatements of all time!¹¹ The decisive factor was the Bolshevik capture of Orenburg which meant that it was only a matter of time before they could send troops direct from Moscow to the Transcaspien front via the railway. The Malleson mission would not be able to resist this force.

The chairman of the inter-departmental conference on middle eastern affairs, Lord Curzon, was critical of Malleson. 'All the expectations which had been aroused had been falsified. Malleson had said over and over again that the Bolsheviks were in a deplorable condition, and on the verge of collapse; so far from this being the case, Orenburg had fallen, and the attempted revolution in Tashkent [by Osipov] had been easily crushed. Malleson had always wanted to go to the Oxus. This would have meant, first, a powerful military force, and, second, the setting up of what would be practically a British Government in Transcaspia.'¹² The conference agreed in February 1919 to withdrawal following a report by the commander-in-chief in Constantinople, General Milne, who had taken over responsibility for Malmiss from the government of India, and had visited Transcaspia to see the situation for himself. Malleson later made much of his successful deception operation against the Bolsheviks to cover the withdrawal of his Indian troops from Transcaspia on April Fool's Day 1919 (the British troops left later for Krasnovodsk, Baku and Batum). In his CAS lecture Malleson contrasted the gratitude of the Turcomans and the helpfulness of Lt.-General Sir George Milne with the neglect of Simla/Delhi, which had not seen fit to send anyone to visit Malleson at any point and had failed to praise his effective conduct of operations. Malleson excoriated Simla/Delhi which 'has a bad reputation in this respect. More than ever out of touch with the army, it is slow to praise but quick to criticize and to blame.' No sooner than Malleson was back in Meshed 'then once more we became liable to receive the savage and ferocious official messages for which Simla is famous....'¹³ Malleson's fight with Simla/Delhi was not to end in April 1919. In the following twelve months he was to take it to another level in what he later characterised as 'the most important and interesting' part of his mission.

Malleson's intelligence operations, April 1919–May 1920

When Malleson arrived back in Meshed he received news of risings in the Punjab and elsewhere in India, followed by the outbreak of war with the Afghans. Malleson later stated his belief that if the Afghans in Herat had been more aggressively-minded they could have posed a real threat to him in Meshed. The fact that they did not he put down to their being more afraid of him than he was of them. He was also convinced, of which he claimed Simla/Delhi were unaware, that the Shi'ites of western Afghanistan were disinclined to follow the lead of their Sunni oppressors in Kabul, especially after the massacres in Kandahar of which he claimed he was to take advantage to keep the Afghans divided. Malleson later publicly downplayed the Afghan threat. 'The Herat garrison was never a danger to us.'¹⁴ But the evidence from the time reveals that he was worried at the possibility of a combination between the Afghans and the Bolsheviks which might cut his over-extended line of communications from Meshed to the Indian border (some 538 miles). He proposed to withdraw to the railhead at Duzdap. In London, however, Lord Curzon and the ministers and officials of the inter-departmental conference on middle eastern affairs, who exerted a watching brief over Central Asian matters, insisted in June that Malleson stay in Meshed. The committee believed that developments in Afghanistan, which pointed towards a cessation of hostilities, lessened the immediate danger that the Bolsheviks would combine militarily with the Afghans.¹⁵ But the committee did not address the question of a possible future threat of military-political co-operation between the Afghans and the Bolsheviks against British India. Evidence for this seemed to be contained in the intelligence which was being sent by the Malleson mission (Malmiss) to the Indian general staff for onward transmission to London.

While the government of India negotiated a peace with Afghanistan, which was eventually to lead to the surrender of British suzerainty and its recognition as an independent state, it had also learnt from Malleson that the new Afghan Amir, Amanullah, was in diplomatic contact with Bolshevik Russia. Letters had been exchanged announcing the independence of Afghanistan

which was duly recognised by the Bolshevik leader, Lenin, and the mutual desire for permanent and friendly relations. While an Afghan delegation made its way to Moscow, a Bolshevik one journeyed to Kabul. Malmiss tracked the progress of both parties through wireless intercepts and agents' reports. There was even a confirmatory message smuggled out of Tashkent to Kashgar by Colonel Bailey who, with a price on his head, was in hiding from the local commissars. Malmiss reported on 8 October 1919 that a Sart tribesman, who had been closely linked with the Bolsheviks but was now in the employ of the Amir of Bokhara, had informed Malleson's confidential agent in Merv that the aim of the Afghan mission to Moscow 'is to bring about a Bolshevik-Mohammedan solidarity throughout Asia and ruin the British Empire by destroying its power in the Near and Middle East'.¹⁶ On his return from Moscow, the head of this mission, General Wali Muhammad Khan, was keen to proclaim his success in securing a definite alliance with the Bolshevik government, involving the retrocession of Afghan territory and the bountiful supply of armaments, ammunition and money. In fact, given British intervention in the Russian civil war, the Bolsheviks had shied away from an offensive-defensive alliance against Britain, although they were prepared to give military and technical help to the Afghans. But, as Malmiss had informed India, the Bolshevik mission under K. Bravin urged the Afghans to await this essential aid, to include aircraft and machine guns, before resuming their war against the British. He assured the governor of Herat that 500 camel-loads of munitions, including aircraft parts and mechanics, would soon arrive at the border post of Kushk en route to Kabul. Malleson's Merv agent reported on 8 September that seven aircraft had arrived at Tashkent from Orenburg. As soon as the rail link between these two towns was fully restored (it had been interrupted by the fighting against Admiral Kolchak) arms would be shipped to Kushk from Moscow. To expedite these deliveries Bravin urged the construction of a spur line to Herat, but failed to convince the local governor who was concerned about the rise in anti-Russian feeling in the area. He was glad to see the back of Bravin and closed the road to Kabul, after the latter's mission (which included a German officer and ten Austrian artificers, all POWs, along with 120 pony-loads of ammunition) departed for the capital, escorted by Afghan cavalry. Bravin's negotiations with the Afghan amir, Amanullah, were more fruitful, with an agreement being drafted, but not signed, whereby Russia retroceded territory in the Pandjeh area (seized in 1885 during an Anglo-Russian crisis) and agreed to supply arms, ammunition, technical aid and a financial subsidy in return for Afghan assistance in resuming an anti-British agitation in India and among the border tribes. The Bolsheviks sought to prevent the temporary Rawalpindi peace between India and Afghanistan becoming a permanent one.¹⁷

Bravin's apparent success was undermined, however, by a growing concern among the Bolsheviks about the activities of Afghan soldiers, consuls and *ulema* in Russian Central Asia, especially in the areas to which the Afghans laid claim. These Afghan envoys gave out that they were engaged in pro-Bolshevik and Pan-Islamic propaganda but the Bolsheviks had their doubts. The aggressive antics of the Afghan consul in Merv, who was generally regarded as a more important personage than the local Bolshevik commissar, the recruiting activities of the Herat shrine custodians and the Afghan colonel Mirza Muhammad among the Turcoman tribes of the Tedzen oasis, caused the Bolsheviks to rush troop reinforcements to Merv and Kushk. There was even a suspicion that the Afghan consul in Bokhara sought not to reconcile the Amir with the Bolsheviks but to support him in a revolt against them in order to create an Afghan-led Muslim state in Central Asia.¹⁸

Malleson was fully aware, from his intercepts of Bolshevik wireless communications and from the reports of his agents, of the 'perfidy', as he put it, of both the Afghans and the Bolsheviks. He made much, in his CAS talk, of his success in causing dissension between these two parties by disclosing, through 'the appropriate channels', the secret aims of each, 'and so the game went on'.¹⁹ But, as one intelligence officer with Malmiss pointed out, this conduct of political warfare 'was to give rise to many legends regarding the British role in the confused situation that had arisen, much of which will undoubtedly remain current until unbiased historians have

access to original records and can separate facts from propaganda.²⁰ There is no evidence from the available documents that Malleson was engaged in playing off the Afghans against the Bolsheviks by divulging incriminating information to each about their real aims. This does not mean that he did not play this game, just that it is not recorded in the documents. It is possible that he did not declare his efforts in political warfare to India and London. If so, this would have been as much due to his perceived need to preserve his power of local initiative as an intelligence chief against the restrictions of higher authority, as it was to protect the names of his intermediaries whom he used to funnel information to the rival parties through the 'appropriate channels'. Perhaps the more pertinent question is whether he needed to play this game. After all, both the Bolsheviks and the Afghans were aware themselves of each other's activities which engendered a mutual suspicion and affected the nature of their relationship. It would be a truism to say that at this time Central Asia was rife with rumour and suspicion about all the many actors on this stage.

In London, Lord Curzon, the acting foreign secretary and the chair of the inter-departmental conference on middle eastern affairs, surveying the Central Asian scene in November 1919, thought that it was impossible for anyone to form any definite opinion on the intentions of the Afghans. It appeared from the conflicting reports which the British had received from various sources, including from Malmiss, that the Afghans had not formulated any definite line of policy, though their chief motive seemed to be self-aggrandisement. But Curzon believed that Afghanistan was the 'pivot of the situation'.²¹ It was the only Muslim state left in Asia which could form a rallying point. Bokhara and Khiva were too small and relatively unimportant, though their attitude needed to be taken into consideration. Curzon thought that the ambitious Amanullah aimed to set himself up as leader of Muslim opinion and give the impression to the Muslim world that he was holding his own against the British. Curzon admired the remarkable cleverness with which Amanullah was making use of the Bolsheviks. This put the Afghans in a strong position. They were recovering lost territory and were playing for the reinstatement of Afghanistan as the centre of a great Muslim confederation in Central Asia. Curzon did not think that Afghan relations with the Bolsheviks meant any more at present than that they were prepared to bargain with them with this end in view. As for Bokhara, the *ulema* controlled its politics and they were essentially anti-Bolshevik. Distant Khiva did not exert much influence on the situation but they too could be regarded as opposed to the Bolsheviks. The Turcomans were cowed and submissive but pro-British and subdued by the superior forces of the Bolsheviks.

Flitting in the background was 'the sinister figure' of Kazim Beg, who was intensely anti-British and was conducting a violent propaganda for the alliance of Pan-Islam with Bolshevism. He had been with the Niedermayer expedition to Afghanistan in 1916 and three years later had moved to Khiva and Bokhara and thence to Askhabad after it had been occupied by the Bolsheviks in July 1919, and where he was said to have become the virtual ruler (and was interviewed by one of Malleson's agents). He had accompanied the Afghan mission to Moscow and by October he had installed himself in Kagan, where he was training the 'Young Bokhara' party in the tactics of political agitation against the Amir. He was in regular communication with the Afghans and had informed the governor of Herat that a combined force of Bolsheviks and Pan-Islamists would soon enter Persia under the leadership of Enver Pasha to expel the British (his wanderings were tracked by Malmiss). This stirred Curzon to ask his colleagues to consider what was being done and what could be done if the Bolsheviks invaded Khorasan and constituted a menace to India. He referred to a communication from the government of India of 26 July 1919 which stated that it was aware of the importance of closing the frontiers of India to 'spies and suspicious foreigners and to keep out Bolshevik agents and literature'.²² Meshed was the most active centre for watching Bolshevik activities in Central Asia and was doing its best to close the route through East Persia. However, 'the come and go' on India's enormous land frontiers was too constant for the British to hope for more than partial success. As to counter-measures, anti-Bolshevik propaganda was disseminated both by wireless outside

India and in the Indian press. But with India's vast frontiers it had 'to rely in the main on the evil being tapped at its source by means of intelligence systems at all the chief centres of Bolshevik activities, thereby facilitating the detection of agents and schemes, devising preventive measures and preparation of suitable counter-propaganda.'²³ The government of India had considered setting up an intelligence centre at Tashkent, since it was the most active base for subversive propaganda against India. It was here that the Bolsheviks had welcomed Pan-Islamists and Indian revolutionaries, such as Maulvi Barakatullah and Mahendra Pratap. Much time, money and effort was spent setting up schools to train Indians and other Asians in the tactics of political warfare and presses to pump out anti-British propaganda, such as Barakatullah's 'Bolshevism and Islam'. They were aided and abetted by the Afghan consul, whose dissolute habits laid him open to Bolshevik blackmail. Malmiss monitored these activities through its wireless intercepts and agents, who included a Russian lawyer and a Polish chemist. But India had only one British intelligence officer there, Bailey, and his movements were too severely hampered by the internal security forces to enable him to run an effective intelligence collection agency. Still, he managed to acquire some useful information and pass it on to India through Kashgar and Meshed. He even managed to discuss Pratap's plans for revolution in India with him when they met, by seeming coincidence, in Kagan.²⁴

Yet Curzon was not convinced that the government of India was well-served by its external intelligence system. He referred to Montagu's suggestion in August to the government of India that a secret Indian mission should be sent to Bokhara to collect intelligence and organise counter-propaganda, paying especial attention to the Indian residents, who otherwise might become Bolshevik agents. This had been carefully considered by the viceroy and Malleeson who had decided, Curzon thought wisely, not to proceed with the proposal. Malleeson had been especially condemnatory of the proposal. He pointed out that it would be difficult to insert such a mission into Bokhara. If they succeeded in doing so their presence would soon become known to the Bolsheviks who had a representative and many spies in the city. Moreover, an Indian mission would compromise the Amir. Malleeson related how the 'Amir has behaved very well in trying circumstances, and his policy of careful outward neutrality and intolerance of all agitation is that recommended by me. He understands that we can give him no armed assistance, and in these circumstances he is doing as much for us as we can reasonably expect. The Bolsheviks on learning of the presence of the mission would certainly demand its surrender, thereby placing the Amir in an awkward predicament. For this reason alone I think Amir would not care to receive [the] mission, and I do not consider it fair to ask him to do so.'²⁵ Malleeson went on to say that he was in communication with the Amir and other contacts in Bokhara. 'I think that the intelligence is pretty good. As regards propaganda ours holds the field. Afghan and Bolshevik lies are not believed. The Mullahs of Bokhara detest the Bolsheviks and give no encouragement to the Pan-Islam agitators.'²⁶ Apart from a few loyal Indian traders and two soldiers from the Guides, sent there with a camel-train of arms by Malleeson, he knew of no Indian residents or agitators in the city.²⁷ He warned that the presence of such a mission would harm his intelligence service and would lead the Bolsheviks to try and intercept his couriers on their journeys to and from Bokhara. Also, he made a plea for India to send him some 'really abnormal and reliable agents suitable for Central Asia intelligence work.'²⁸

Malleeson used this opportunity, as he had done before, to impress his ideas on the future of Central Asia on the governments in Simla and London. He urged them to lobby at the Paris peace conference in favour of independence for Bokhara and autonomy for Transcaspia and Turkistan. He believed that this would win over the Muslims of Central Asia to Britain and deprive the Pan-Islamists of support. This would make it more difficult for the Bolsheviks to further their revolutionary agenda. He advocated bailing out the starving Turcomans to prevent them looking to the Bolsheviks and Pan-Islamists for succour. 'The goodwill of the Turcomans is especially necessary for us from an intelligence point of view, as without their help it would be almost impossible to get news through from the various places in Central Asia.'²⁹ He

promoted the idea of raising Turcoman levies to carry out raids against Bolshevik lines of communication. Above all, Britain needed to keep to these arrangements since her withdrawal from parts of Russia, including Transcaspia, was 'giving us the character of being selfish and unstable and leaving our allies "in the cart" when our immediate purposes have been served'. Finally, in order to maintain British prestige and position against a Bolshevik invasion threat, he lobbied himself for the maintenance of a strong, 5,000-man, force at Meshed with aircraft. This would keep Khorasan calm, neutralise western Afghanistan and bolster the morale of 'our friends in Central Asia'.³⁰

Neither the government of India nor the inter-departmental conference on middle eastern affairs in London showed any interest in Malleson's political proposals, although they were prepared to back his reinforcement. Curzon discounted the Bolshevik military threat as long as Malleson had a strong force at Meshed. He agreed that Malleson's strength, of one battalion of infantry and one regiment of cavalry needed to be augmented with a mountain battery and another infantry battalion. This had already been sent from India. But Malleson's other requests, for aircraft and the extension of the railway from Duzdap to Neh, were debated by the conference. Montagu sounded a discordant note when he questioned why events in Transcaspia could not be discussed without reference to Bolshevism and Pan-Islamism. He did not really understand why Pan-Islamism was always regarded as a menace to British interests. Britain could not prevent the Afghans from seeking the retrocession of territory from the Bolsheviks. He desired a military opinion on whether it was best to seek a forward defence of India in Transcaspia or a close one on the Indian border. Also, he sought to discover 'what was the real contemplated objective of General Malleson. Was he merely showing the flag, or was he serving as a jumping off place for the defence of Persia? If he were only a news centre, the extension of the railway to Neh did not seem to be justified by the requirements of the situation.' He wanted the opinion of the Director of Military Intelligence (DMI) in the War Office on the reliability of Malleson's reports 'which did not appear to him to be sufficiently carefully weighed before they were despatched'.³¹

The Commander of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS), Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson, believed that the further away from India an attack could be met the better. But the British could only counter a Bolshevik threat from Transcaspia in concert with the Afghans. He said Malleson was only retained at Meshed as 'a kind of intelligence agency'. Curzon thought it was 'rather more than this. [Malleson] was to act as a deterrent against a Bolshevik invasion of Persia, and his presence there with a substantial force had certainly so far achieved this object. He would go further and say that he was convinced that his continued presence there, if reinforced would still have the same effect.' Malleson occupied a similar position in north-east Persia to the British line from Baghdad to Kasvin to prevent hostile elements invading Persia from the west. 'The protection of Persia was at present a British interest as much a Persian. He had little doubt that General Malleson would have to stay in Meshed for some time, possibly for one or two years.'³² If so, the railway needed to be extended from Duzdap to Neh.

Montagu stated that if India had been solely responsible for a decision she would have withdrawn Malleson and the question of the extension of the railway would not have arisen. He thought that the continued funding of Malmiss should be shared between the British and Indian governments on the well-known principle of the division of expenditure for representative duties in Persia (Malmiss had been designated to date as military operations and so had been paid for in full by the British government). Curzon warned that if Malmiss was withdrawn the Bolsheviks would be in Meshed within a fortnight. 'Their occupation of one of the principal provinces of Persia would, in his opinion, be a capital disaster.'³³ In answer to Montagu's enquiry, General Thwaites, the DMI, said that the information available to the War Office was so fragmentary and contradictory that it was difficult to form a reliable appreciation of the accuracy of Malleson's reports. The CIGS, Wilson, thought that it was important to secure the co-operation of Amanullah since without Afghan support in case of a Bolshevik attack, Malleson would not

be able to hold his position at Meshed. In an example of the use of intelligence by policy-makers, Montagu read out an intercepted message from Bravin in Kabul which reported that the Afghans would not resume the war against the British and that they had told the tribes in Waziristan not to make trouble (the Afghans were actually saying the exact opposite to the frontier tribes, according to British reports). Curzon said that by the terms of the Rawalpindi treaty with Afghanistan no approach could be made to Amanullah on any question during the probationary period of six months (i.e. until 8 February 1920). Curzon, as chairman, gave the verdict that Malleson should be retained at Meshed for the moment but there was to be no extension of the railway from Duzdap to Neh and he was not to be provided with aircraft.

Curzon had also noted, based on intelligence from Malmiss that a 'desperado of the name of Suric, who was described as an Extraordinary Representative of the Russian Republic, left Tashkent at the end of October for Herat'.³⁴ Malmiss tracked him across Central Asia, with one agent reporting that 'a special train of three carriages passed towards Kushk at 1600 hours, 4th November. This was said to contain Bolshevik Minister, Suric, Afghan Sirdar and others from Moscow'.³⁵ The Sirdar was the Afghan general, Mirza Muhammad Khan, and 'the others' included three Russians (a colonel, a doctor and a secretary), a German, three Austrians, fourteen Cossacks and 'the Hindus', Mohendra Pratap and an unidentified Madras Brahmin, as well as Maulvi Abdur Khan. Malleson had despatched a Turcoman chief to kidnap Suric's party south of Yulatan but had been prevented by Afghan military patrols. Suric's entry into Herat from Kushk, accompanied by several of the Herat Shrine guardians and a one hundred strong Afghan cavalry escort, was greeted with a sixty-gun salute and the turnout of the entire garrison. A *jirga* of all the local mullahs and khans was held, followed by a banquet at Char Bagh. Z. Suric presented the governor with the Order of the Red Star and tried to ingratiate himself with talk of profitable mutual trade relations and the giving of presents to the Guardians of the Shrine. In order not to outstay his welcome, as the garrison began to murmur about the excessive display, Suric and his party departed for Kabul on 18 November via Maimana and Mazar-i-Sharif. He did not arrive in the capital until January 1920. He took up where Bravin had left off in drafting a commercial treaty between Russia and Afghanistan (Bravin had been an appointee of the Tashkent Soviet and, when the latter was reorganised by Suric on instructions from Moscow, he had been replaced as chief negotiator in Kabul. He later defected and was assassinated). A more general treaty of friendship and mutual support was to follow. Malmiss, the government of India in Simla/Delhi and the India office in London closely followed the negotiations through the wireless intercepts and agent reports. Although Suric stated that he was prepared to agree to the Afghan terms, he balked at meeting the excessive demands for the supply of arms and technical help (including telegraph and wireless facilities) and to the retrocession of territory. He seemed intent on neutralising Afghanistan with a mutual commitment not to conclude any agreements which would threaten each other's interests; keeping Tashkent informed of any aspects of the coming negotiations with the British which would affect Russia; allowing the appointment of an official representative of Russia in Kabul and the setting up of trading 'factories' at Kandahar, Ghazni and Jalalabad. This was too much for Moscow who paused the negotiations. Although Amanullah had declared that he was prepared to resume the war against India if he was supplied with the military wherewithal, Moscow was reluctant to conclude an agreement which might involve them in a war with Britain. A greater priority was to secure diplomatic recognition and a trade agreement with Britain. With regard to Afghanistan, Moscow aimed to draw it away from Britain and to garner her support for Bolshevik aims in the east. Aware of this manoeuvring by Moscow, the government of India proposed that the British government conclude a treaty with Russia whereby both pledged not to support Afghanistan against each other, which would prevent the Afghans playing their divisive game. The Russian strategic position in Central Asia improved in 1920 with the capture of Krasnovodsk, the defeat of the revolts in the Ferghana valley and Semirechia, and the deposing of the Khan of Khiva and the Amir of Bokhara. And the Afghans were

gradually forced out of Pandjeh and Merv. Since they could not secure an agreement with Britain, and were reluctantly reconciled for the moment to the disappearance of their Pan-Islamic dream in Central Asia, the Afghans concluded a treaty with Russia, which was ratified in 1921. A treaty was to follow later in the year with Britain which allowed for the surrender of British suzerainty and the recognition of Afghan independence. By then, Malleson had retired from Meshed.³⁶

The reliability of Malleson's intelligence reports from Meshed had come under increasing criticism in London in early 1920. At a meeting of the inter-departmental conference on middle eastern affairs, Lord Hardinge, the permanent under-secretary at the Foreign Office had asked Winston Churchill, the secretary of state for war, whether he was satisfied with Malleson's conduct of operations at Meshed. He deemed the general tone of his telegrams as being alarmist. His colleague, Lancelot Oliphant, reported that Lt.-Colonel Grey, the consul-general in Meshed, who had recently arrived in England, was 'of opinion that General Malleson's reports were unnecessarily pessimistic'.³⁷ Sir Arthur Hirtzel, the permanent under-secretary at the India Office, had doubts as to the importance to be attached to Malleson's reports and had asked for the opinion of the government of India. The latter admitted 'there was some force in the suggestion', but said that on the whole they were satisfied with the intelligence furnished by Malleson. Grey was of the opinion that Malleson was 'badly served by his agents who were unreliable'.

Churchill pointed out that Malleson was at least consistent. 'Having made up his mind that the Bolshevik menace was a real danger, he transmitted every scrap of information which tended to bear out that view, but without necessarily committing himself to the reliability of the reports which he had received. He was acting more as a reporter of rumour, and left HMG to decide to what extent these rumours were to be believed.'³⁸ The Chair, Austen Chamberlain (standing in for Curzon, who was in Paris) suggested that the different points of view on the reliability of Malleson's information should be referred to Curzon. Malleson later commented in his CAS lecture that: 'I do not think that we ever made any grossly inaccurate reports, such as I often received from centres elsewhere. On the other hand, we sent in a stream of information from every part of the huge area for which we were responsible. It was a veritable *tour de force* for the officers I have in mind [and for whom he sought recognition from Simla and later London] to have organized and to have brought to such a state of efficiency in so short a time so excellent an intelligence system.'³⁹ In contrast, Teague-Jones, who served with Malleson at Meshed thought that his mission 'was one big joke' and related how the cipher clerks in the Residency dreaded his telegrams to India which kept them in constant action. 'It became notorious that any statement by any casual agent or camel driver in the bazaar would be made the subject of a long foolscap wire.'⁴⁰

The Bolshevik capture of Krasnovodsk, the key port on the eastern shore of the Caspian, in February 1920 changed the strategic situation in Transcaspia and removed the rationale for the Malleson mission in the minds of key members of the Cabinet. On 11 February the Cabinet's finance committee called for the withdrawal of Malleson's force from Meshed. The prime minister, Lloyd George, declared that if the government of India objected it would have to pay for the continued maintenance of Malmiss.⁴¹ Curzon fought a rear-guard action, reminding the inter-departmental conference on middle eastern affairs that Malleson had at Meshed a force of only some 1,500 men with support along a line of communication running down the eastern frontier of Persia. 'He was there more as an outpost than as a military commander. He might be compared to a man on a watchtower.'⁴² Curzon remarked that it had always been envisaged that, if Malleson's position were seriously threatened by a superior force, he would withdraw. Curzon pointed out that the Cabinet had recently taken alarm at the cost of various commitments in the Middle East and had made some hasty decisions, one of which was to withdraw Malleson's force altogether. Curzon had asked for the government of India to be consulted and the viceroy had stressed the political importance of retaining a force in Khorasan. Curzon adhered to his view that Malleson's withdrawal at this juncture 'would be an act of extreme

folly' and that he intended to persuade the Cabinet to approve its retention, provided the government of India was prepared to help defray the costs in equal measure with the British government.⁴³ The India Office pointed out that Malleson was not expected to defend against a serious Bolshevik attack but only to counter their subversive activities and check local disaffection. Malleson might be able, therefore, to carry out his functions successfully if the force at Meshed and on the line of communications were reduced.

Montagu informed the inter-departmental conference in April that Malleson had been replaced (by General Lesslie) owing to some local friction between him and the consul-general at Meshed, Lt.-Colonel Grey (this seems to have been over Malleson's 'alarmist' reports about the Bolshevik threat to Khorasan). Curzon wanted to retain the military force at Meshed and on the line of communication (which cost £6 million per annum but could be reduced). This was opposed by the India Office and the government of India who preferred to stand by the Cabinet decision to withdraw Malmiss and the line of communication troops and just keep the consular guard at Meshed, along with the military attaché and several British officers which would be enough to maintain 'our present military intelligence system'.⁴⁴ The India Office was not prepared to contribute to military expenditure, only to political costs. Montagu said that, 'He could not himself see what earthly good Malleson's force was to India. It was employed solely in keeping up the spirits of the Persians. It was regarded by the Bolsheviks as a base camp for operations against themselves. The Government of India was very short of money, and if the Bolsheviks were really to advance they would prefer to spend money within their own frontiers. From a purely Indian point of view, they would rather save the money now and not on the possibility of a Bolshevik advance, which could only be satisfactorily met on the frontier itself.'⁴⁵ Churchill reminded the committee that when he presented the Army estimates to the Cabinet the decision had been made to withdraw Malleson's force immediately from Meshed. Consequently, the War Office had no funds for the continued maintenance of this force and he was strongly against further expenditure since it was regarded as unnecessary by both the War Office and the India Office. Churchill had enquired about the progress of evacuation and had been informed that nothing had been done because Curzon had requested Montagu to postpone the withdrawal and had stated that it had not been definitely decided upon. Churchill demanded that the Cabinet attend to this matter.⁴⁶ It did, and Montagu informed the viceroy on 5 May that Malmiss was to be withdrawn forthwith. The Cabinet did not want to wait the five months which the government of India thought necessary to execute the withdrawal.⁴⁷ In the event, however, logistical difficulties ensured that the withdrawal was not carried out in full until the spring of 1922.

Malleson's revenge

Judging by his later excoriation of the commander-in-chief in India, the India Office and the Army Council for not gazetting 'the rewards so richly deserved by the officers whose services' in Malmiss he had brought to their attention, Malleson was determined to use the occasion of his CAS lecture to wreak his revenge on those who had orchestrated his dismissal and the withdrawal of the mission. He accused them of not having 'the faintest conception of the important work carried out by this Mission, and to the success of which these officers of mine made so constant and so powerful a contribution'.⁴⁸ History has not been kind to Malleson since the coverage of his mission in the few memoirs and the analytical studies of this Transcaspien episode has been generally critical and, as one commentator has put it, has 'left no trails of glory in the annals of British military history'.⁴⁹ It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Malleson's blunt and abrasive character and the accusation of his empire-building from Meshed alienated many key officials and politicians in both India and London. It would seem that his only real supporter, Curzon, who for reasons of his own to do with the defence of his

newly-crafted treaty with Persia, was outflanked in Cabinet and committee by Montagu, backed up by his permanent officials and the viceroy, Lord Chelmsford, who wanted to withdraw Malmiss on grounds of cost. They argued that it amounted to a bluff since it could not resist a serious Bolshevik invasion of Khorasan. Yet this begs the question of whether the Russians seriously contemplated such an attack. Following Malleson's departure from Meshed, colonels Redl and Grey, aided by Major Blacker, were kept busy encouraging the Persian governor of Khorasan and his gendarmerie to suppress the revolt of a former Kurdish bandit, one Khudu, who was backed by the Bolsheviks, in the mountainous area between Meshed and the Russian frontier. Redl admitted that the Bolsheviks could have easily intervened and 'made things unpleasant... but they apparently thought that our troops had not really withdrawn but were hidden behind mountain ranges, and would come out at the right moment'. Redl thought this might have been a factor in their decision not to intervene but he thought the collapse of the Anglo-Persian treaty gave them 'no real reason to intervene'. At the time of Redl's departure from Meshed with the remnant of Malmiss in the spring of 1922, he noted that 'Khorasan was flooded with Bolshevik spies and propagandists. The general tenor of the propaganda was anti-British, and particularly directed to fomenting disorder in India, for which purpose a special propaganda school was maintained at Tashkent.'⁵⁰ Malmiss under Malleson had monitored this activity, through wireless intercepts and his agents in key communication hubs. If he is to be believed, and there is no reason to doubt him since his account was validated by Redl, he had used this intelligence in his political warfare against both the Bolsheviks and the Afghans. His aim had been, as he put it, 'to queer the pitch of Bravin' and later Suric in their relations with the Afghans.'⁵¹ It no doubt contributed to the deepening distrust that both sides had for each other on the ground and in the fraught treaty negotiations in the audience chamber at Kabul. But it was not enough to thwart the eventual signing of a treaty between Russia and Afghanistan. Malleson had been critical of both the military effort of India in the Third Afghan War and the uncertain peace that followed it, warning Simla/Delhi that the Afghans intended to renew hostilities. That this did not happen was due, as Malleson later admitted, to the reinforcement of troops on the north-west frontier of India. He omitted congratulating Simla/Delhi on eventually securing a treaty with Afghanistan which recognised its independence and ended British suzerainty. One senses that Malleson felt too much bitterness against the government of India, for the failure to recognise the achievements of Malmiss, to admit of any praise. For those interested in British Indian intelligence operations, however, the surviving documentary material for the key period of 1919-20 in Central Asia, gives a detailed picture of how, why and when the British succeeded in monitoring, and in some case thwarting, secret Bolshevik activities intended to undermine the British position in the region. As such it represents an addition to our knowledge of the period and the place.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

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17. See IOR/L/PS/18/A184, Central Asia, Persia, Afghanistan, etc. Bolshevik and Pan-Islamic Movements and connected information, November 1919.
18. *Ibid.*, A184 and A185.
19. Ellis, *The Transcaspian Episode* p.124; Malleson, 'The British Military Mission...', p.104.
20. Ellis, *The Transcaspian Episode*, p.124.
21. IDCMEA, minutes of 18 November 1919.
22. *Ibid.*; for Kasim Beg also see A184 and A185.
23. A184.
24. See F.M. Bailey, *Mission to Tashkent* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1946), pp.226–8.
25. A184.
26. *Ibid.*
27. Bailey picked up these Guides soldiers on his secret journey from Tashkent to Meshed in 1920. See Bailey, *Mission to Tashkent*, p.256.
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