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Fighting a Small War during The Great War: British Strategic Planning and Operations in Central Asia, 1917-1919

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The assumptions of any prewar strategy can easily affect and shape wartime operations. In turn, these form part of the historical opinion and can also influence the lessons drawn from a conflict. The danger in this process is that the sampling of operations might be too narrow or colored by the debate which established a strategy in the first place, thus presenting an incomplete understanding of an army's experience. Such appears to have occurred with the British army on the Western Front during the First World War. The idea that the British were ill-prepared for an age of modern industrial warfare is part of the case against the prewar strategy adopted by the British military. This paper will argue that before a complete analysis is possible of the British army during World War I, one must account for the operational success of the limited number of British forces which fought brilliant campaigns in the theatres of Central Asia: Armenia, Central and Southern Persia, and southern Turkestan.

The Continental strategy and British colonial experience

Prompted by a sharp deterioration in European relations in the decade before the war, some strategists argued for the deployment of an expeditionary force to the Franco-Belgian border in case of war with Germany. General Henry Wilson had guessed correctly that the critical point of any German drive into France would be in the vicinity of Maubeuge. Subsequently he persuaded the Committee for Imperial Defence in 1911 to adopt this "continental" strategy as the quickest way to defeat the German army, safeguard the British Empire, and prevent the economic collapse of British trade threatened by a protracted war. However, the reality of the fighting during the First World War soon undercut

these assumptions, reviving not just the contemporary detractors of the "continental" strategy but also leading to a general historiographical debate that has continued in one degree or another about the efficiency, conduct, and leadership of the British Army to this very day.¹

The fact remains, nevertheless, that the war was more than a European conflict. Industrialization and imperialism made the conflict fundamentally different than the previous wars of the nineteenth century. In this sense, the performance of the British military should also be measured in a broader context. In its character the British Army was shaped by its all-volunteer, professional, and mobile experience gained in fighting the "small wars" of the Empire.² Even in considering and adopting the "continental" strategy, the military showed great adaptability, a hallmark of a truly effective military.

Moreover, other strategic avenues were available to the War Office and Committee of Imperial Defence once hostilities commenced. The British were not constrained only to concentrate on the Western Front, though the bulk of the Army continued to fight there. Moreover, imperial forces were also highly experienced and professional, being drawn from metropolitan and colonial formations and ably led by British officers. This component of the British military responded well to a variety of enemy threats—Persian, Turkish, German, and even Bolshevik—that emerged in Central Asia during the war. Imperial forces, mainly but not exclusively from the Indian Army and Anglo-Indian led native levies, waged a successful "small war" in Central Asia against bandits and rebels, while also facing down modern armies. In one of most remote theatres of World War I, the British military projected power, defeated vastly larger enemy forces, and expanded the Empire's boundaries well beyond its nineteenth-century limits, thereby demonstrating its military worth to the government.

Several factors made the use of colonial forces and the waging of a

small war attractive to the British. First, the isolate theatre and rugged terrain of Central Asia naturally limited the size of the formations which could deploy and operate in the region. Roads, railways, telegraphs, and other lines of communication, not to mention centralized political authority, were either non-existent or barely present.³ Second, on a tactical-level, the British favored maneuvering against their military objectives from many different directions. This obviously required highly trained soldiers, experienced small unit leaders, responsible junior officers, and a self-contained logistics train.⁴ Third, the British traditionally used local tribes for intelligence and as the source of native levies to help defend important areas. The British found that at best representatives from local "allied" governments were corrupt; at worst they colluded with the enemy. Finally, the British understood the importance of supplementing effective political and economic development with military strategies to hold these remote areas.⁵

Traditionally, the British used the Indian Army against the lawless region of the Northwest Frontier. However, in the years before the war, Lord Kitchener, Commander-in-Chief of British forces in India, wanted the Indian Army to defend the colony against the Russians, who were slowly expanding toward Afghanistan and into Persia. Even following the end of Kitchener's tenure, when Delhi reversed his reforms, the Indian Army would be called on to reinforce the British in France in case of hostilities and provide imperial garrisons. In addition, Indian forces provided initial security missions to the Persian Gulf, which enabled the British to respond quickly to the entrance of Turkey into the war. For example, brigade-sized forces deployed to various Persian Gulf ports, including Muscat, Chahbar, Jask, Hangan Island, Bushire, and Shatt al-Arab.⁶ Shortly thereafter, Churchill related that in mid-August, Kitchener had requested the Royal Navy transport the remaining regular British infantry and artillery from India to Europe, to be replaced with men from the

Territorials, and authorized the Indian army to begin operations against German East Africa.⁷ Then, when the Ottomans entered the war, India reinforced those forces already at Shatt al-Arab into the Indian Expeditionary Force. By November, the IEF seized the nearby city of Basra and in June 1915, began a major offensive toward Baghdad.⁸ These operations and a subsequent Russian attack into eastern Persia and Armenia halted the Turks in early January 1915 and led to an increase British presence in Arabistan to protect the approaches toward Basra and southern Persia.

Persia, British garrisons, and the South Persian Rifles

The security missions in southern Persia became decidedly more tenuous as Tehran gradually became convinced that the Central Powers were going to win the war. German consuls in eastern Persia began to curry favor with disaffected tribes outside of the provincial capital of Shiraz, held by an Indian brigade.⁹ Undoubtedly, German pay and the relatively small-size of the Anglo-Indian garrisons provided tempting targets. In September, German-paid tribes started nightly raids against the garrison at Bushire. Tehran either turned a blind-eye or grew tolerant of the Germans. Either way, pro-British elements lost influence to the tribal chiefs, several of whom established an independent government at Hamadan.¹⁰ The political situation worsened over the rest of the year. German agents persuaded the Swedish gendarmerie, which traditionally policed southern Persia, to rebel.¹¹ By early 1916, Tehran had lost control of Kermanshah, Isfahan, Shiraz, and even areas around the capital.¹² Clearly, the British needed to do something more to stem the problems in Persia, because the security missions were unable to exert much influence outside their garrisons. In February, the British decided that should Tehran align with the Central Powers, the best option would be to hold Bushire and reinforce the Indian and Persian frontiers.¹³

India also sent troops into eastern Persia, along a line that ran from

Russian Turkestan to the Gulf, in order to prevent German agitators from raising rebellions in either Afghanistan or India. A half-battalion of the 29th Punjabs formed the nucleus of what became the East Persian Cordon.¹⁴ The Russians contributed Cossacks to guard the cordon's northern flank.¹⁵ To re-secure southern Persia, the War Committee decided to authorize India to recruit, train, and lead corps of Persian levies. The Committee also allocated two divisions to reinforce India if Afghanistan also joined the Central Powers.¹⁶ In March, Brigadier General Sir Percy Sykes arrived in Bandar Abbas with orders to begin organizing Persian military police to use against rebel tribes.¹⁷ To aid in the training and protection of the Persian force, Indian light cavalry and infantry also arrived in Bandar Abbas. With a larger force, Sykes moved to Kerman and aided an allied tribe in suppressing the rebels.¹⁸ With this area secured, Sykes started to recruit and train locals into the nucleus of what became known as the South Persia Rifles.¹⁹ Simultaneously, the British began security operations around Bushire with the intent of opening the road to Shiraz. To this end the War Office reorganized the garrisons in the Gulf and placed them under the direct control of India.²⁰ Once enough Anglo-Indian and Persian troops were deployed, Major-General Douglas pacified southern Persia, constructed roads, and installed telegraph lines to improve local communication, supply, and control.

These changes temporarily solved the security issues in southern Persia, but Britain's manpower requirements, especially on the Western Front, hindered its overall war effort elsewhere and meant that additional deployments might produce a crisis. The outbreak of the Russian Revolution threatened the whole allied position in Central Asia as the Russian army started to disintegrate. Amidst revolution and civil war, Russian formations deserted, joined the Bolsheviks, or turned to banditry. Armenia, Georgia, and Turkestan declared their independence, while Bolsheviks moved to seize vital strategic

depots and negotiate a separate peace with the Central Powers. The Turks took advantage of Russia's collapse by launching a military advance into Persia. In the meantime, Britain remained focused on operations in Mesopotamia and the Middle East and could ill afford a large-scale movement of forces for the Transcaucasus. Therefore, the General Staff implemented what had worked well in southern Persia and raise British-led native forces.²¹

For its part, the Turkish push also directly threatened the South Persia Rifles, the Anglo-Indian led levies.²² The government of Tehran, already wavering, became increasingly more anti-British as several governmental ministers with tribal ties began to denounce the SPR as a tool of British expansionism and covertly encouraged dissension and desertion in its rank and file.²³ By the spring of 1918 companies of the levies deserted and in several instances turned on their officers and NCOs. That July, 8,000 hostile tribesmen besieged the headquarters of the SPR at Shiraz. With Tehran refusing all aid, and with India and Britain with practically none to offer, Sykes had to rely on his officers and NCOs. He mounted a vigorous defense of the city and then managed to split the tribal alliance after persuading a tribal leader to defect.²⁴ However, the SPR had effectively ceased to exist and, though later reconstituted, neither India nor Britain completely trusted the "new" SPR and disbanded it following the war.²⁵

The "adventures" of Dunsterforce

Facing a serious military deterioration in Transcaucasia, the British sent Major-General L.C. Dunsterville, a colonial officer who had served on the Northwest Frontier, to lead a mission into Georgia and Armenia to begin training levies. He would later write of his mission that "the prospects were considerable, and success would be out of all proportion to the numbers employed."²⁶ He was told that his command was to consist of two hundred officers and NCOs, currently assembling at Baghdad, and was to proceed to

Tiflis (Tbilisi) via Baku. However, after arriving in Baghdad in January 1918, Dunsterville discovered his force actually consisted of twelve officers and two drivers. Undeterred, Dunsterville scraped together a small group of men and departed Baghdad on 27 January in a column of Ford vans that were protected by a single Lewis machinegun.²⁷ Because most supplies in the theater were supporting larger operations, Dunsterville was required to provide for his own logistical support from Baghdad to the port of Enzeli, arrange transportation via freighter to Baku, and finally board a train for the final leg to Tiflis.²⁸ To do this he needed to secure fuel for the journey to Kurdistan. The column soon rendezvoused with a small unit of Russian Cossacks led by Colonel Bicherakov, who controlled the petrol depot at Kermanshah and was to become one of Dunsterville's closest allies during the intervention at Baku. Once refueled, however, the column, now reinforced by the Russians, was delayed by weather until early February.

Once the weather cleared, Dunsterville and Bicherakov's men reached Kasvin, a city just outside of territory controlled by the Jangalis, a violent provincial guerrilla movement based in the regional Persian capital of Resht.²⁹ Mirza Kuchik Khan, the ruler of the Jangalis, was also allied with the Bolsheviks at Enzeli and had promised to block the road leading to the port to any Allied forces. The Jangalis were also being supplied by the Turks and were under the command of a competent German officer.³⁰ Meanwhile, at Kasvin, Dunsterville and Bicherakov ordered the men to avoid provoking the locals. Lacking significant strength to deal with the Jangali fighters operating along the road and countryside leading to Enzeli, Dunsterville ordered his men to put on a display of force which impressed the local inhabitants.³¹ The combined forces departed Kasvin and entered the Bolshevik-controlled port of Enzeli on 18 February.

The President of the Bolshevik Committee in charge of the port was,

according to Dunsterville, "formerly a clerk in a shipping office" and deeply resented the British presence.³² Initially, the Bolsheviks were concerned that the British mission was intended to undermine the peace negotiations and continue the war against the Germans, which Russia clearly wanted to end. To prevent the British from sailing for Baku, the Bolsheviks ordered their patrol boats to fire on any vessel that sailed without their permission. However, even had Dunsterville tried to leave, his mission lacked adequate shipping and clear directive on how to proceed. Therefore, General Dunsterville and Colonel Bicherakov decided to withdraw to Hamadan, which the Cossacks had occupied since March, to await further developments.³³ Dunsterville also reasoned that from Hamadan, which was easily defensible, he could fulfill the intent if not the actual letter of his original orders by planning "to interfere with the numerous Turkish and German agents who were at work in this part of Persia."³⁴

With the weather deteriorating and the likelihood of an attack by Kuchik Khan increasing, Dunsterville offered to assist Bicherakov in paying for the supplies of the Cossacks, but not for actual combat services: Bicherakov was no mercenary. Additionally, both commanders agreed that they would consult each other before undertaking operations.³⁵ The agreement immediately paid off when a detachment of Cossacks returned to Kasvin and defeated a group of Jangalis which had tried to enter the town. Colonel Bicherakov then moved the remainder of his Cossacks there as an advanced guard, allowing Dunsterville to establish a stronger British presence in Hamadan. The British developed an extensive intelligence network; many of Dunsterville's soldiers knew Russian already, while others soon learned Persian. The British then arrested enemy agents, including one Austrian officer. Simultaneously, Dunsterville developed closer relations with the civilian population, meeting with local notables and Persian officials, feeling out potential troublemakers, such as

the local governor, and then isolating them.³⁶ When anti-British leaflets appeared in the town, Dunsterville printed and distributed his own set, stating the peaceful purpose of the force.³⁷ To avert a potential civilian crisis over the British purchases of goods, which threatened to deplete stocks of food already low because of a famine, Dunsterville arranged for famine relief with the Imperial Bank, paid day-laborers cash wages to stimulate the markets, and supported soup kitchens.³⁸ Finally, he sent cadres of NCOs and officers to the surrounding towns to raise levies and irregular forces.³⁹

Relations with the central Persian government in Tehran remained tense because of the presence of the Jangalis and another Turkish offensive.⁴⁰ Furthermore, the Turks exerted political pressure on Tehran to expel Dunsterville, arguing that the British armed presence violated Persian neutrality.⁴¹ To counter such efforts, Dunsterville met with various Persian officials in Tehran, but failed to persuade the Persia government. More important to the mission were the peasants who welcomed the British famine relief.⁴² Meanwhile, reinforcements, stripped from Mesopotamia, started to trickle to Hamadan. In April, Dunsterville received the 39th Infantry Brigade composed of the 1/4 Hants Territorial Infantry, 1/4 Hampshire Regiment, 1/2 Gurkhas, a battery of artillery, several more armored cars, four airplanes, and a naval attaché.⁴³ With the Turks approaching Baku, Dunsterforce, as the command was now known, was sent to reinforce the city and protect its oilfields, but this required clearing the Jangalis from the route.

Dunsterville linked up with Colonel Bicherakov at Kasvin, and in mid-June the Anglo-Russian force of 2600 men headed for a showdown with the Jangalis. However, Dunsterville had to assign many of his troops for garrison duty and route protection on the long march to Enzeli, thereby losing much of his force even before engaging the hostile Jangalis. After clearing most of the road from Kasvin, Dunsterville had to somehow secure Resht. He decided on

a demonstration and so dispatched a small group of armored vans which were covered by airplanes. He also ordered aggressive patrols along the nearby roads to prevent the Jangalis from regrouping.⁴⁴ At this point, the Bolsheviks, so desperate to defend Baku, offered Colonel Bicherakov command of the Red Army currently operating near the city. And though his departure left Dunsterforce without its staunchest ally, the command theoretically might benefit the British in the future.

Believing the Jangalis to be pacified, Dunsterville ordered the march resumed to Enzeli. However, the strain of the situation was showing on Dunsterville. In his journal, he would later reflect that to succeed he need, "one division, exclusive of line of communication troops."⁴⁵ For the immediate future, Dunsterville needed some form of passage from Enzeli to Baku. So with the help of a naval attaché, Dunsterville secured passage on three large ships. The next problem was how to disembark in the Bolshevik-held city of Baku. Fortunately, Dunsterville caught a lucky break when, while awaiting embarkation at Enzeli, a coup led to the replacement of the Bolsheviks by the pro-British, Central Caspian Dictatorship. On 10 August, Dunsterforce embarked with Dunsterville on the lead vessel, the *President Kruger*. The irony did not escape Dunsterville, who wrote of being "a British General on the Caspian, the only sea unploughed before by British knees [sic], on board a ship named for a South African Dutch president...sailing from a Persian port, under a Serbian flag to relieve from the Turks a body of Armenians in a revolutionary Russian town."⁴⁶ Finally, months after leaving Baghdad, Dunsterville reached Baku.⁴⁷

Dunsterville quickly toured the 20-mile defensive perimeter poorly manned by Armenian militiamen, former Russian Army soldiers, and a lone company of British soldiers which Dunsterville had hastily sent as an advance party.⁴⁸ The British company reported the city government had failed to

prepare adequate defenses. Furthermore, the British distrusted the intention of the government to actually defend the city. The only good news was that Bicherakov's men were also operating in the vicinity.⁴⁹ Dunsterville disbursed the remainder of his men along key points of the perimeter to bolster the defenders, and tried to convince the dictators to take more seriously the city's defenses. However, the dictators were more concerned about consolidating their hold over Baku and wished to have the British do most of the fighting.⁵⁰

Lacking significant British reinforcements and growing increasingly embittered at the dictators, Dunsterville believed the defense was ultimately doomed. On 1 September, during a skirmish between the city militia and the Turks, a British outpost was outflanked and almost destroyed when an Armenian unit suddenly abandoned the line.⁵¹ Dunsterville informed the dictators that without their immediate support he would withdraw Dunsterforce from the city.

The dictators threatened to sink any ship carrying the British that weighed anchor. In response, Dunsterville drafted secret evacuation plans and awaited an opportunity to withdraw. In the early morning hours of 14 September, the Turks launched their final assault. The British and city militia defended vigorously until 9pm, when Dunsterville ordered a withdrawal; too exhausted to pursue, the Turks failed to prevent the British embarkation. Dunsterforce steamed from the harbor and reached Enzeli in less than two days, by which time Baku had fallen to the Turks.⁵²

In the final analysis, Dunsterforce accomplished much. First, it raised British influence throughout western Persia at a time when the Allies were suffering tremendous political losses in Tehran. When the Russian Army disintegrated in the chaos of revolution and a renewed Turkish and German force threatened the whole theatre, Dunsterforce provided the British with a military and a political response which not only helped to defend Baku but

also convinced the Persians of the Empire's continued support. In fact, soon after reaching Enzeli, Dunsterforce was reconstituted into Norperforce (North Persian Force), which spent the rest of the war keeping open the vital the Baghdad-Enzeli.

The running battle against the Bolsheviks: Turkestan

The military and political situation in Central Asia was tenuous even before the fall of Baku. The British faced major strategic threats, any one of which could jeopardize not only their position in Central Asia but also conceivably extend the war. First, the German and Turkish offensives aimed at Baku also endangered the Caspian Sea and put the critical port and terminus of the Central Asian Railway at Krasnovodsk within reach of the enemy. Second, the Moscow Bolsheviks were increasingly hostile to British involvement in Baku, which they suspected as geared to dragging out a war the Russians had presumably ended. Meanwhile, the Tashkent Soviet, which at this time in spring and summer 1918 was isolated from Moscow by the White Armies, was undecided about the British, but should it become hostile might strengthen anti-British sentiment in Afghanistan or even lend support to Indian Nationalists. Finally, during the war, the Russians had housed large numbers of Austro-Hungarian POWs in camps in Turkestan, whom the Bolsheviks were now recruiting into the Red Army in return for a quicker repatriation.

In response to these deteriorating conditions, the government of India decided that it would extend the East Persian Cordon further toward the border of Russian Turkestan and then order additional troops into the area, in case the Germans and Turks crossed the Caspian, overwhelmed the Royal Navy's flotilla there, and seized Krasnovodsk. Major General Malleon along with elements of the 28th Cavalry and a battalion from the 19th Punjabs established a command post in the Persian city of Meshed, very close to the border with Turkestan and the important railway. MalMiss, as the force was called, was

charged with preventing the Turks and Germans from gaining control of the Central Asian Railway, but it was not to intervene in the Russian Civil War. This meant that Malleeson would have to first establish contacts with friendly tribes or agents in Turkestan to act prior to any enemy move towards Krasnovodsk. Fortunately, Malleeson caught a lucky break in mid-July 1918.

While the British were busy in Transcaucasia, railway workers along the Krasnovodsk to Merv section of the Central Asian Railway revolted against the Tashkent Soviet and established an anti-Revolutionary Committee at Ashkhabad.⁵³ The Tashkent Soviet wasted no time in amassing a large, well-armed military force of several armored trains, artillery pieces, and the numerous former Austro-Hungarian POWs and pouncing on the rebels at Merv. The British took notice of the siege of Merv because a trunk line of the Central Asian Railway ran from Merv straight to the Afghan border. Worse yet, the new Transcaspian Government seemed incapable of either retaking Merv or preventing a further Bolshevik advance towards Krasnovodsk. The executive committee of the new Transcaspian government requested British assistance, but London and Delhi were indecisive about intervention in the Russian Civil War.⁵⁴ However, Delhi authorized Malleeson to lend the Transcaspian government financial and military assistance.⁵⁵ Brevet Lt. Colonel D.E. Knollys, the commanding officer of the 19th Punjabs, sent a machinegun section to bolster the Transcaspian forces at Merv. The Indian government also transferred several more troops from the East Persian Cordon to Malleeson's command.

Still, the Bolsheviks overran Merv in mid-August, pushing the Transcaspian forces and the attached Punjab machinegun section to Dushakh and then Kaakha, well on the way to Askabad. Malleeson wisely used this occasion to negotiate usage rights to the port of Krasnovodsk, several Caspian steamers, and assurances that, should the Turks storm the port, the British were authorized to destroy its oil, port, and rolling stock facilities. In

return, Malleson provided machineguns, rifles, ammunition, Indian and British instructors to the Transcaspian military, and stationed groups of soldiers at key points along the Central Asian Railway.⁵⁶

The Bolsheviks maintained pressure, shelling Kaakha on 24 August just prior to the arrival of a company from the 1/19 Punjabs that were sent to reinforce the battered defenses.⁵⁷ Lt. Col. Knollys arrived with the rest of the battalion. The Bolsheviks then attacked and swept the defenders almost from the town, but were stopped at the railhead by withering fire and a bayonet charge from the Punjabs. Together with more reinforcements from the 1/4 Hampshire, recently detached from Dunsterforce in Baku, the Transcaspian troops were able to protect Kaahka.⁵⁸ Additional British troops were also sent from Mesopotamia and eastern Persia, including the 28th Light Cavalry and a battery of artillery.

In general, the British forces were well suited for the unique conditions of warfighting in Turkestan. First, the main cities of Ashkhabad, Krasnovodsk, and Merv were connected only by rail, so both sides found logistics and re-supplying very difficult. However, this situation was no different than the relative desolation that the Indians had found in southern Persia or even along the East Persian Cordon. Second, most fighting had to be done from armored trains, which severely taxed any military's ability to conduct leg marches. Flanking attacks were difficult but could prove devastating to a defender who suddenly had an enemy force appear between him and his logistics base. Knollys described very intensive isolated fire-fights that occurred: "When the retiring force thought it time to make a stand they would get out of their trains and take up position on either side of the line. The advancing force would see them halted, fire a few rounds from the armoured [sic] train, and if this had no effect, get ready to [frontally] attack."⁵⁹

Developments in September 1918, namely the withdrawal of Dunsterforce

from Baku and open hostilities against the Bolsheviks in Turkestan, convinced the British that they faced a perilous military situation. To make matters worse, India was unable to supply more reinforcements. On his own, General Malleon transferred what little troops remained in Meshed to strengthen Knolly's detachments in Turkestan. However, Malleon was neither panicked nor desperate. He needed more troops and so decided to entice the Transcaspian government into assuming a greater share of the action. He pressured it to grant concessions to the numerous Turcomen tribes, which until then had largely remained out of the struggle with the Tashkent Soviet. In return, they agreed to help against the Soviets, providing more light cavalry. The British also assisted in re-organizing their ally's command staff to improve efficiency and raise competency. Finally, Malleon transferred more arms to the Transcaspian force, including Vickers, an airplane, and artillery. In fact, given enough reinforcements, MalMiss commanders felt confident they could clear and hold Merv before the Bolsheviks brought in more reinforcements.⁶⁰

By 12 October everything was ready, and Malleon ordered Knollys to attack toward Dushak. With the 1/4 Hampshire as a reserve in Kaakha, the 19th Punjabs, 28th Cavalry, two companies of Transcaspian infantry, and several hundred Turcomen horsemen started the tough fighting advance toward Dushakh and Merv. Five days later, the Bolsheviks retired toward Merv which they quickly abandoned. At this point on 23-24 October, India forbade any further advance beyond Merv, partly because such a move would require more reinforcements than were currently available, but also because the Cabinet had no clear policy regarding the Bolsheviks.⁶¹ Regardless, by early November and the arrival of winter neither side was ready for large-scale operations, though Knollys did expect hostilities to resume in spring.⁶²

Despite the hard fighting, the British military situation by November

1918 was impressive. The Turks and Germans were defeated, and British forces started to re-occupy Transcaucasia and the Indian Government, concerned with growing tensions with the Amir of Afghanistan, mulled redeploying its troops to the Northwest Frontier. Other postwar issues developed. For example, the British had to now disarm and transport thousands of former enemy combatants from the area. Also, more ominously, the Bolsheviks remained a threat. And, of course, the politics behind the expected peace conference in Paris necessarily delayed military planning. This prompted an agitated, Churchill, a week after the Armistice, to warn the Cabinet, "It is ridiculous to suppose that the war is over because the fighting between the armies has stopped."⁶³

Not surprisingly, the Bolsheviks took the opportunity to launch an attack against Transcaspian forces holding a railroad juncture east of Merv on 16 January 1919. Knollys immediately rushed reinforcements from Merv and repelled the enemy. However, indecision in London meant there was no counter-attack. Again, Churchill repeatedly asked of the Prime Minister, David Lloyd George for some direction on the War Office, now responsible for operations, was to proceed. For his part, Lloyd George was primarily concerned with the peace conference and paying for war costs. Neither Britain nor the Empire could sustain a massive war against the Bolsheviks.⁶⁴ The best bet, giving these constraints, would be to withdraw British military forces and support the "White" Russian armies and not necessarily such weak governments as those of Transcaspia or Armenia. Not surprisingly in March the Anglo-Indian force was withdrawn from southern Turkestan to Meshed. Despite military aid, the Whites were soon defeated and the Bolsheviks were able to complete the conquest of southern Russia and challenge British influence in Central Asia.

Conclusions

What made the British military successful in Central Asia was its ability to adapt operational forces to fight both small wars on behalf of

local pro-British governments from the military's vast colonial experience, while simultaneously using regular and colonial forces to fight major armies.

These operations were not done as a picture of military efficiency; in fact, these interventions were often *ad hoc* and lacked political direction.

However, in the final analysis, Dunsterforce, the SPR, and Malmiss paid off handsomely by enabling the British to mount credible defense of India inside of Persia, avoid widening the war to Persia and Afghanistan, and preventing the Germans and Turks from gaining more economic and material advantages from Russia's surrender. Arguably, in the postwar, Bolshevik phase after 1917, only a sustained political commitment on behalf of the Empire might have saved Central Asia from the Bolsheviks. In the end, though, the prewar strategy that sent the BEF to Europe and allowed overseas British and Indian forces to handle the "tertiary" theatres of Central Asia succeeded. Throughout the war in Central Asia, Britain's colonial military supplemented by native levies waged both a colonial and modern campaign that showed the worth of maintaining a military with strategic flexibility.

1. For a current look at the two sides evaluating the performance of the British army see Gordan Corrigan, *Mud, Blood, and Poppycock: Britain and the First World War* (London: Cassell, 2003), and John Mosier, *The Myth of the Great War: How the Germans won the battles and how the Americans saved the Allies* (New York: Perennial, 2001).

2. According to an eminent military theorist and imperialist, Major General Edward Callwell, a small war was any conflict, "other than those where both the opposing sides consist of regular troops." See C. E. Callwell *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice* (London: H. M. S. O., 1906), 21.

3. Hew Strachan, *European Armies and the Conduct of War* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 82.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*, 85.

6. Frederick James Moberly, *Operations in Persia, 1914-1919* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1987), 48.

7 Winston S. Churchill, *The World Crisis, 1911-1918*, rev. ed. (New York: Free Press, 2005), 171-174.

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8. Spencer Tucker, *The Great War, 1914-18* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 187.
 9. Morberly, 65.
 10. See J. A. Douglas, "The Bushire-Shiraz Road, 1918-1919" in *Journal of the Central Asian Society*, Vol. X, 1923, part II, 104.
 11. Morberly, 54.
 12. Ibid., 103.
 13. Ibid., 64.
 14. Ibid., 87.
 15. Ibid., 92.
 16. Ibid., 150.
 17. Brigadier-General Sir Percy Sykes, "Persia and the Great War," in *Journal of the Central Asian Society*, Vol 9, May 1922, 177.
 18. Morberly, 159.
 19. Morberly, 180.
 20. J. A. Douglas, "The Bushire-Shiraz Road" in *Journal of Central Asia Society*, Vol. 10, 1923, Part II, 107.
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