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105th YEAR OF PUBLICATION

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THE SINO-RUSSIAN BORDER DISPUTE

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by Gerald Morgan

IT is hardly surprising that the intermittent border negotiations between Russia and China have only recently aroused interest here. We have so little information to go on and Central Asia seems far away, yet their outcome will be of desperate importance to the world. It may throw a glimmer of light on the subject if we go back eighty years to a period when there was great unrest in China, which had its repercussions in Central Asia and coincided with Russia's eastward expansion. At that time what happened was of direct interest to Britain because of the Russian threat to India. This note deals primarily with Sinkiang whose importance today lies in the fact that it is within this frontier province that China is developing much of her nuclear potential.

In the middle of the last century the Manchu dynasty of China was becoming increasingly corrupt and weak. As with previous dynasties when that happened, there were rebellions against the régime which the imperial army, itself corrupt and ill-led, had difficulty in dealing with. Already the army had had first the Taiping and then the Nienfei rebellions on its hands, but far worse than either of these was the rising of the militant Muslims who formed a sizeable minority of the populations of Szechuan, Kansu and of Southern Yunnan on the Burmese border. Inevitably it brought out in sympathy the predominantly Muslim population of Chinese or Eastern Turkestan as Sinkiang was then known. It was too much for the depleted Chinese garrison army to deal with and the imperial army was too occupied with the rebellion in China proper, besides being too far off, to be able to spare reinforcements.

In the southern region of Turkestan known as Kashgar the rebellion threw up in 1862 a remarkable leader, an exiled Khokandi soldier of fortune named Yakub Beg, who for several years ruled the region with considerable authority. Seeking wider security and ultimate independence, Yakub Beg courted recognition by India. Britain saw an independent Kashgar as a buffer state which could be a check to Russian designs on India. Consequently we accorded Yakub Beg diplomatic recognition and also proposed a trade treaty; at the same time we urged China to grant him his independence. It was a rash move which China ignored, and though no treaty was actually signed we later had cause to regret it. Yakub also courted recognition by Russia who for somewhat different reasons likewise favoured his independence, but they never got as far as agreeing on terms.

The Muslim rising occurred at a time when Russia's expansion eastwards into Central Asia, and farther east towards the Pacific, was in full swing. In that process she had just occupied Tashkent and Samarkand. Meanwhile what were her true intentions as regards Kashgar? Would recognition be only a prelude to annexation and if so would it be a flanking movement towards the ultimate invasion of India? These were burning questions in Lon-

don and Calcutta at the time. Whether Russia really had any ultimate designs on India is at least debatable. She may not even have had any clearly defined objectives in Central Asia either, beyond establishing her own influence and furthering her trade there. But meanwhile, as the Russian frontier marched with Chinese Turkestan, the rebellion had serious effects along it which could not be ignored.

The main repercussions were not on the Kashgar border which under Yakub became relatively settled, but along the Dzungaria border, the region of Turkestan north of the Kunlun mountains, over which Yakub did not attempt any control. In Dzungaria Chinese troops still held on in a few posts almost completely cut off from China whilst the rebels roamed at will elsewhere. It was in the Dzungarian province of Ili that this lawlessness was of most concern to Russia.

Ili is a particularly fertile valley, and perhaps because of its fertility it was inhabited by an exceptional number of tribes. There were Schibös, Dachur Solons and Onkur Solons who had all migrated from China, as well as Kalmaks, Taranchis and the indigenous Tunganis. This heterogeneous collection was ruled over by China on the principle of *divide et impera* and she deemed the province sufficiently important to maintain a garrison, in normal times said to be twenty-five thousand strong. Russia's trade there was large enough for her to maintain a number of permanent trading posts and even a consul at Kuldja, the capital. The Chinese garrison was ample for its purpose in times of relative peace but when Urumchi, the capital of Dzungaria, fell to the rebels the already reduced garrison was isolated. Its commander actually appealed to Russia for help, but when this was refused, the troops, having little stomach for fighting, shut themselves up in their forts and left the province to the mercies of the rebel tribes, who in the usual tradition at once began to fight amongst themselves.

Russia perforce withdrew her trading posts but that was the least of the trouble. The tribes being nomadic were little concerned to respect the Russian border. Beaten tribes fled, pursued by their conquerors into Russian territory where they plagued and plundered Russian villages. Then they formed new alliances and re-crossed the border to attack their erstwhile conquerors. Kuldja fell with fearful massacre and thereafter became a shuttlecock between rival Tunganis and Taranchis. In these circumstances Russia was unusually forbearing in tolerating the situation for six years, until finally she intimated to China that if she could not pacify the province she would do so herself in self-defence. So it came about that in 1872 Russia occupied Ili to restore law and order, and surely in similar circumstances we would have done the same.

It was some time before the occupation became known in Britain and when it was it increased concern about Russian intentions. Sir Thomas Wade, our Minister in Peking, was naturally consulted. Never alarmist, his opinion was that as Dzungaria lay north of the formidable Kunlun mountains (and he might have added the Pamirs, Tien Shan and Karakoram as well) he did not think the occupation increased the threat to India, though it might be a step towards occupying Kashgar. Just at this time the explorer Ney Elias*

THE SINO-RUSSIAN BORDER DISPUTE

was setting out from Peking to cross Mongolia with the intention of reaching India. Probably at the suggestion of Wade he took as one of his objects a visit to Kuldja. He never got there for, having passed safely through rebel-held territory to reach Urumchi and Kobdo, the risk of going on to Ili was far too great, so he crossed into Siberia ultimately reaching Europe through Nijni Novgorod. Consequently the events in Ili were not fully known until they were described two years later in the German *Russische Revue* by a Russian eyewitness, W. Radlov.

The next move of importance came from China. By about 1873 she was beginning to get on top of the Muslim revolt in the provinces of China proper, and had defeated the Muslims in southern Yunnan. The Panthays as they were called there had controlled the Burma-Yunnan border for several years and they too had sought British recognition and help. Just as in the case of Yakub Beg, but seeking here to secure the Burma frontier, we had given our support. Unfortunately we did not draw the appropriate deduction when the Panthays were defeated.

China now organised an 'Army of the West' which first defeated the rebels in Szechuan and Kansu and thereafter proceeded to recover Chinese Turkestan. Its commander was Tso Tsung Tang and he was equipped with modern weapons which, however, he left locked up in their arsenals for fear he would be executed if he lost them. The West knew almost nothing of the activities of this 'Army of the West' at the time, but in two years Tso had crossed the formidable Gobi desert and recovered all of Dzungaria, except Ili still occupied by Russia. The campaign can be accounted a remarkable feat for those days. He was now a threat to Yakub Beg from the north; but for a year he hesitated to attack Yakub's better trained and equipped army. In 1877, after ruling for twelve years, Yakub died mysteriously, possibly by poison, and that gave Tso his chance. Using intrigue and bribery as his chief weapons, as well as some of Yakub Beg's now disaffected troops, Tso was soon in control of Kashgar. He had dealt with Dzungaria on the usual lines by sword and fire, but by showing calculated if unexpected leniency in Kashgar he was at once welcome. On the whole Kashgaris preferred their traditional rulers to upstarts like Yakub Beg. As may be guessed, relations between China and Britain were not improved, for through failure to recognise China's historic powers of recovery we had now twice supported ephemeral anti-Chinese régimes, and this was at a time when we badly needed close accord, perhaps a treaty, with China, to counter Russian expansion. There was even serious consideration in some British quarters of a military alliance and a British-led Chinese army.

China was now in a position to demand the end of Russian caretaking of Ili and the return of the province and she appointed an Ambassador to St. Petersburg with instructions to negotiate a treaty. The Ambassador was Chung Hao, a Manchu nobleman of the old school who seems not to have taken his task too seriously. Instead of travelling to Russia overland through Chinese Turkestan and briefing himself by talks with the new Chinese Resident, he elected to travel comfortably by sea. Russia always knew how to handle oriental officials and he was well feted and decorated with

when he reached St. Petersburg. The protracted talks ended late in 1879 with Russian agreement to return part though not all of Ili whilst retaining for herself certain strategic advantages as well as Kuldja, the capital. Russia also demanded and got not only trade privileges but the right to establish consular posts in Turkestan.

The Tzar signed the treaty at Livadia but there was consternation in Peking when it was learned what Chung Hao had given away. China refused to ratify the treaty and Chung Hao was recalled forthwith. With obvious misgivings he took a slow boat to China, as well he might, for Tso Tsung T'ang laid twenty counts against him before the Emperor. He dawdled in Shanghai and to avoid meeting Li Hung Chang, the great Imperial Chancellor of that day, he travelled by barge along the classic Grand Canal route to Peking instead of going by sea to Tientsin. Friends at court saved his head but he forfeited his rank and vast possessions and was banished to the Amur province, which was the equivalent of being sent to Siberia.

This débacle caused a crisis in Sino-Russian relations and no Russian traders or consuls were allowed into Turkestan. In fact there was nearly war between the two countries and China so far forgot her recent ill-feeling against us as to put out feelers for a Sino-British alliance. But that is another story. Two years later in 1881 a new Treaty, the Treaty of St. Petersburg, was signed which returned Kuldja and most of Ili to China and agreed the demarcation of the actual border which is now in dispute. It also embodied amongst other things the previous agreement about trade facilities and consular representation, whereupon Russia installed M. Petrowski, an able diplomat, as Consul in Kashgar. He soon established a strong influence there, much to the detriment of India's trade relations with Sinkiang, and in spite of continued Chinese ill-feeling against Russia.

It would have been greatly in British interests if the frontier agreement begun in Ili had been continued southwards to the Pamirs which at that time were almost a no-man's-land and which the Russians were constantly probing with exploring parties. Such a demarcation would have been a partial means towards preventing Russia from reaching the mountain passes over the Hindu Kush into India which was the great danger. Russia herself actually wanted to extend the demarcation and sent a mission to Kashgar for the purpose. But although Wade urged China that demarcation was in her interests, the Chinese were little interested. They still preferred the kind of fluidity which had been good enough for the past two thousand years. The sardonic Ney Elias from his listening post at Leh in Ladakh, where he watched Russian and Chinese movements in Central Asia for six years, remarked that the Chinese team was of low enough calibre for the Chinese Government to disown its authority if the results were displeasing. He wrote: 'A Celestial Corporal in the army of the Elder Brother of the Sun could be considered of suitable rank to be associated with a general in the service of any outside barbarian prince.' Although China resented Russia's commercial influence in Sinkiang, Russian encroachments on the north and north west had at least removed the constant threat to the province of the militant Khokandi and Kirghiz tribes, although naturally the tribes con-

THE SINO-RUSSIAN BORDER DISPUTE

tinued to migrate across the border with their flocks and herds, as they do. Nearly twenty years elapsed and there were plenty of diplomatic negotiations and excursions about Central Asia before Russia and China were to agree their frontiers. Even so, as we now see, their finality is in question, although the border strips now in dispute are only a pretext for the much wider underlying issues involved.

In those days we understood scarcely at all China's role in Central Asia. It had always been a land of conflict and constantly changing tribal allegiances. In relatively normal times China played one tribe off against another so that they were never strong enough to constitute a threat. She also relied a great deal on her prestige. But when tribal combinations became too strong or she became weak at home then she abandoned her suzerainty and withdrew her garrisons back to China. This traditional policy was first explained by Owen Lattimore in 1951 in his book *Inner Asian Frontiers of China*, in which he has described China's Inner and Outer Frontier system. It was the Inner Frontier of China proper which had to be held inviolate even in bad times. The Outer Frontier could always be returned to when the situation improved. In the face of a strong Russian attack the same strategy might again be applied.

Since fluidity was the keynote in Central Asia it follows that China never accepted a situation as permanent. This unwillingness to accept finality was reflected in her treaties with the West. She had never seen the need for them in all her long history hitherto, for all foreigners were barbarians who were, *ipso facto*, expected to pay tribute to the Son of Heaven. When the West demanded them she gave in through weakness but no doubt always with the intention of abrogating them when the time was ripe. It was not so much a matter of honouring them in the Western sense (after all they were always 'unequal'), as of recovering lost 'face' at some later date.

Confining ourselves to border treaties in particular, we have many current instances of the way China manipulates border issues as it suits her. For instance there have been those concerning her frontier with India, one of which prompted an article in the *Contemporary Review*, 'Our Little War in Sikkim'. The two treaties with Russia described above are the latest examples. It can be taken as a sign of belief in her own increasing strength to put it no higher, that she is now demanding the abrogation of all treaties with Russia enacted during the Tzarist régime.

This short résumé poses an important question. How far is China's long experience of diplomacy and strategy in Central Asia still basically shaping her thought and policy there today, and how far has it been supplanted by modern Marxist Communist teaching? 'Kremlinologists' are able to make fair guesses about Russian policy but we have no access to current thought in Peking. Only a matter of eighty years ago, an educated Chinese with experience of foreigners propounded a view on the status of his own country. He said: 'China is the centre of the earth, and the greatest country is the yolk of the egg, and the heavens the white. As there is no white in an egg, no other country exists.' Whether or not that view was based on

CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES

indicated by such loose terms as 'the west', the 'freedom-loving powers', the 'democracies'—by such powers—or 'the capitalist exploiters', the 'colonialists', 'imperialists'—by their opponents. Everyone in North America knows to which group Canada belongs. Here is something of major significance breaking down the barriers between the peoples who are the heart of 'the west'. Canadians cannot escape this. Few of them would want to escape it, especially since it is plain to those of the old traditions among them that within 'the west' not only themselves, not only the United States, but Great Britain as well can find their best prospect for the future. When 'the chips are down', Canadians and Americans (and their common mother country) will be found standing shoulder to shoulder. Canadian freedom to bicker and assert rests strongly on the ability so to stand.

Relations with the United States will always call for careful handling but by one device or another Canadians will find it possible to share the same house with a giant and avoid being crushed to death.

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THE SINO-RUSSIAN BORDER DISPUTE. Continued from page 235

holds, it would at any rate be true to say that no great country has traditionally shown less desire to communicate or to be understood.

It may, in conclusion, be worth recalling the view of an experienced traveller and Indian civil servant of the last century, H. E. M. James, who wrote: 'Until Chinese habits and ways of thought are changed—a process which will take many centuries—they will not attain to that pitch of discipline, purity of administration and self-control which alone will enable them to use European methods of war and weapons successfully. When they have attained it they will not want to devastate the world.' The great Russian explorer, General Prejevalski, said much the same thing at the same time. It is a fact that China has never been expansionist, and has never fought a war except to recover lost territory or in self-defence.

*[Ney Elias (1844-97) undertook a number of dangerous independent journeys and Government missions in Central Asia and was a leading authority on the region. His outstanding feat was a journey across Western Mongolia and Siberia, starting from Peking. He undertook three missions to Chinese Turkestan and on the last continued his journey across the Pamirs to Afghanistan, returning to India eighteen months later. (His last expedition was as Commissioner of the Burma-Siam Boundary Commission in 1889. Thereafter he was Consul-General at Meshed, 1892-96.) The biography of Ney Elias is to be published at the end of this year by Messrs. George Allen and Unwin.]