

The Long Road East

William Bowden-Ritchie

Bagdad had fallen and with it dreams of German Expansion into the arid lands of Arabia. Germany, however, did not require land; they needed food and oil, Baku had both. Located in the crumbling Russian Empire, easily within the grasp of the Ottomans, the German people would be fed again. This couldn't happen, there could not be a link from Berlin to Baku. But who could stop it? A large army would be spotted and where would they draw the men? Lionel Dunsterville would be the solution. A small force of about 200 officers could travel through neutral Persia to Enzali then sail up to Baku, a short trip of 12 days at the most. On January 27th we set out from Bagdad. Only I and 10 other officers departed along with 47 drivers. We were to be bolstered along the way. No one was to find out. That is why we brought gold.

As the wheels of the Ford trucks roll on, a horrible sight greets us. The vehicles grind to a halt. Blocking our way were two men lying face down on the track. We all get out, John Wardman ran over, confirming what we all knew; they had both died of starvation. Dunsterville said that this was just the beginning of what was to come. We trundled on to Kermanshah. As we came over the Hilltop a galloping horseman rode up to meet us, dressed in a Russian uniform with a fur hat (hardly needed in Persia) and a fine jacket upon which hung many medals. My limited Russian told me that this man was Colonel Bicherakov, the leader of a group of Cossacks loyal to the Tsar, who acted as a rear guard for the departing Russian Troops. He explained how they would go with us. As we travelled on to Asadabad disaster struck and the misfortune we had eluded for some time came hurtling towards us like a Whizzbang. The snow started to pelt down, William Trevor joked that the war will be over by the time we get out of this mess. I began to believe him, the boredom of being stranded at 7000 feet is unbelievable. The Russians weren't much fun, but there Fur Hats (which once we mocked), became the envy of us all. A week we were stuck there before the snows finally fled before us like a Communist before a German. We had hardly travelled 30 miles before we were hit by bad weather again at Hamadan, although not for as long. This was certainly turning out to be an adventure, such a thing I would never have imagined, at home in Canada.

I almost forgot to introduce myself, I am Robert and was a captain before I chose to join the Dunsterforce. It was quite an adventure getting here too, we went around the Cape of Good Hope on a very 'dirty' transport. Dirty was an understatement, but we were colonial soldiers, a right mismatch as it happens, so anything would do. I sailed up the Persian Gulf before driving to Baghdad, where I met Lionel Dunsterville. He isn't the most competent commander I've served under, but he was fluent in Russian, which is more than can be said of me! We continued for another 200 or so miles, which passed without a hitch before our arrival at Qazvin. The city gates loomed over us as we approached. Suddenly the ominous

silence that had surrounded us for the last mile was rent into a million shards, like smashing glass. The throngs of people, who surrounded us, started shouting in Persian. Roy Casey turned to me and muttered "God damned Jangalis". You see, the leader of this part of Persia (called Gilan) is Mirza Kuchik Khan. The people here are often called the Jangalis due to the jungle climate surrounding the hills. He was in league with the Communists who ran Enzali and together they vowed to never let the British through. I suggested going around the city to Lionel, but to this he merely muttered back, "Only road to the Caspian this. And even if we could it would be clogged up by Russians" I then recalled the roads littered with Russian men. I remember eating with one of them, he was an officer and was, I think, the only literate one there. There was friendship between us, but we were certainly not allies. Most of them were Bolshevik because that's where they were heading. I heard one discussing the Soviet in Kazian. They spoke as though they believed in the cause but only because that's what they were told to believe. Kazian must be where they came from, I thought at the time. I was suddenly snapped from my thoughts by a Russian voice behind me. "The Kazian road will be clear". It was Colonel Bicherakov. He looked grave but no less proud. "It is ruled by a Soviet and this Khan must watch his back, Durachit" Suddenly a more worrying possibility opened itself to me, what if we were to be attacked? I hardened myself, I was a soldier not a foreign correspondent. I resolved to bed down for the night and wait for what little hope the day-light might bring. Waking to the sound of many movements in the camp, my fears were allayed, we were going.

The movement of people on the road was enormous. I couldn't have believed for a second that we would have made it a mile, but we marched on. Kazian was apparently a Russian port right next to Baku. We abandoned our plans to make for Tbilisi, Kazian was so close. We trundled up, Lionel got out to meet a guard at the gate. I heard Lionel attempting to explain that we are British and on a special mission, the guard was having none of it. Lionel returned. "We must talk to the Soviet". We all shivered, a change was in the air.