CHAPTER IV

Painting Central Asia Red

The geographical and climatic conditions that had rendered Central Asia difficult of access from the beginning were replaced by something even more formidable in the first quarter of the 20th Century. The antiquity of its culture testified to by Herodotus, the wonders of the many civilisations that had been buried under the desert sands and of course the Great Game, had projected Central Asia as the stamping ground of intrepid men from all over the world. The coming of the Communist regime in Russia, brought about by the October Revolution of 1917, made travelling to this part of the world, in the initial stages risky and challenging and subsequently, after reconsolidation of power by the Bolsheviks, impossible. The Iron Curtain had descended.

The descent of the Iron Curtain brought to the fore a number of colourful figures with a flamboyance peculiar to Central Asia in the manner of Timurlane and Genghiz Khan: a one-man mission from India seeking Soviet help to topple the British Government, M.N. Roy; Paul
Nazaroff, a geologist who master-minded the White uprising against the Bolsheviks in Tashkent; and the mad Baron Ungern-Sternberg in Mongolia.

During Tsarist times, the Khanates Khokand, Samarkand, Khiva and Bokhara were officially Russian protectorates, but had never been fully absorbed into the Russian Empire. Life in these parts had remained virtually unchanged from medieval times up to the 20th Century. The red tide of Communism that swept over the Khanates in 1917 was to change life here forever. It is an irony of fate that the Tsarist line of Russia was extinguished on Asian soil, in a barbaric fashion that calls to mind the summary justice meted out by the Emirs and Khans of Central Asia.

On July 16th 1918, Tsar Nicholas II, the last of the Romanovs, his wife the Empress Alexandra, their four daughters and invalid son were whisked away to Ipatiev House¹ in Yekaterinburg and there secretly and

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¹. It was called the "House of Special Purpose" by Yurovsky, the officer who commanded his men to open fire on the terrified family in the basement of the house.
brutally murdered. All those lands that had been semi-independent during the Tsarist regime were now, one by one recaptured by the Bolsheviks, with the plundering, pillaging, rape and other atrocities attendant upon an invading army. With Moscow (the newly declared Communist capital) so far away, and with few officers in charge who had any real grasp of the new philosophy, all kinds of barbaric deeds were performed in the name of Bolshevism that would have horrified Lenin. But he himself was enmeshed in a desperate fight for survival against the Whites – counter-revolutionary fanatics who were ready to give up life for the Imperial Russian flag, and all that it represented. Added to his troubles was the Allied intervention of 1918-20. Only after the whole of Russian Central Asia was firmly in Lenin’s hands could he think of expansionist policies, towards his dream of a World Soviet. With the Bolsheviks’ coming to power, the Anglo-Russian Convention that had been agreed upon in 1905 and signifying the official end of the Great Game, became a meaningless scrap of paper. British hackles were raised as the hard-riding Cossacks made their way into Russian Central Asia, which was then still politically no-man’s land. The age-old game of hide-and-seek, together with the hostilities of an undeclared war, began again between the British and the Bolsheviks.
This phase of Central Asian history with all its ramifications is the subject of Peter Hopkirk's *Setting the East Ablaze* (Hereafter STEA).

In this vicious silent struggle between the two super powers, legendary cities like Samarkand and Bokhara (once famous trading centers along the Silk Road), came to be used as listening posts by the British and Bolsheviks alike, to spy on each other’s moves. Britain’s Imperialist heyday was past, but it was convinced of its monarchic superiority. Russia was crazed by its new philosophy, Communism, and was determined to spread it all over the world. Conflict was therefore inevitable. The British Government in India, its own hold on the sub-continent rendered somewhat precarious by the growing restiveness of the native population, sent out its formidable secret service agents into Bolshevik territory to find out their moves and plans. For their worst fear, which had been at the root of the 19th century Great Game, had become the fondest dream of Lenin. It was his plan to wrest the colonies from the European and British powers, so that their own home economies would collapse, and world revolution follow. But to achieve the first part of his plan, Lenin could not rely on arms and force alone. His plan was to employ the services of a gifted Indian revolutionary named M.N.Roy who
was hovering about, waiting for his attention. Roy himself was attempting to gather together an army of men who were disillusioned with British rule and train them in both the communist outlook and warfare. It suited Lenin to allow this young revolutionary have his own way, for he had much to gain and little to lose from his enterprise. Lenin himself was trying to negotiate with Amanullah, the Emir of Afghanistan to be allowed to establish a communist base there, from which the prevailing unrest in India could be fomented. But the British were equally determined to keep the Bolsheviks out of Afghanistan, for if they had their way, then the supposed threat to India would become very real indeed. In this context, Colonel Percy Etherton, who took over the British consulate at Kashgar from Sir George Macartney, and General Malleson in Meshed were instrumental in supplying the British Government with secret intelligence reports on the situation on the frontiers of India. Afghanistan, in time-honoured fashion expertly played off one major enemy against the

2. As a young subaltern he had made a bold and dangerous journey through innermost Asia, travelling about nearly a year. He wrote a book on his travels entitled *Across the Roof of the World* (Hopkirk, STEA 96).
other: after an abortive attempt to seize the northwestern part of India, Amanullah conducted peace talks with the British, while maintaining “a flirtation with an only-too-eager Moscow” (Hopkirk, STEA 81). The British conceded extremely generous terms to Amanullah in the subsequent peace treaty, which included recognition of Afghanistan as a fully independent kingdom. This was mainly due to their fear lest Amanullah throw in his lot with the Bolsheviks.

There was also the very real possibility of a Jihad, or holy war by the Muslims of Afghanistan and Central Asia against the Bolshevik advance. Malleson, for one, was convinced that a huge pan-Islamic rising against the Bolsheviks was imminent throughout Asia and he duly reported as much to his government. The trouble mainly arose from the neo-colonial attitude of the Tashkent Bolsheviks, “European to a man” towards the natives of Central Asia (Hopkirk, STEA 22). Most of Tashkent’s new rulers who posed as commissars were ill-educated men with no experience of government or administration. They did not have the support of the very people whose interests they professed to espouse. In the pathetically futile resistance mounted by the Emirs of Bokhara to
the invading Red troops, we see the last vestiges of a grand and ancient culture giving way before a new political ideology which lasted but seventy-odd years. The Muslims themselves, numbering more than 15 million, had woken up to the fact that Lenin’s initial promise of self-determination to the former Khanates was not going to be honoured by the Tashkent Bolsheviks, who were not very different from their Tsarist predecessors. Relations between the native Muslim population and the local European-born Russians, never good even in Tsarist times, now began to rapidly deteriorate throughout Central Asia. The Bolsheviks for their part, clearly regarded the Muslims as their subjects, a fact also known to Lenin, and officially admitted as well. Georgi Safarov, Lenin’s special emissary to Central Asia, said:

“It was inevitable ... that the Russian revolution in Turkestan should have a colonialist character. The Turkestan working class, numerically small, had neither leader, programme, party nor revolutionary tradition. It could not therefore protest against colonial exploitation ... For this reason the dictatorship of the proletariat took on a typical colonialist aspect” (Hopkirk, STEA 109-110).
This was precisely the reason why the head of the Comintern\(^3\), Grigori Zinoviev, an inspired orator, was unable to convince his Muslim audience at Baku (at a rally) to believe that the Bolsheviks would help them fight off British imperialist oppression and that they must join forces in this. Despite open criticism from the doubtful Muslim delegates, the rally was officially passed off as a resounding success. Meanwhile in India, the phenomenon of Mahatma Gandhi had stolen the thunder from Roy’s grandiose plans in Central Asia for the liberation of his country. The story of Gandhiji’s non-violent resistance to British Imperialism and the ultimate success of his methods is too familiar to require retelling. Suffice it to say that Roy’s plans did not materialize as planned, for Lenin had been forced by the British into a position\(^4\) where he had to call off Roy’s enterprises and close down a military school he had opened in Tashkent. Thus Roy’s incipient army had to be disbanded even before it could learn to make formations.

\(^3\) Comintern - Communist International, the official political party of the Bolsheviks.

\(^4\) The Anglo-Soviet Trade Agreement in 1921 – a compromise between Bolsheviks in Russia and the British in India.
As British phobia of the Bolsheviks grew, so did the intensity of their secret service activities in Bolshevik territory. Colonel Bailey was one of the British secret service’s right hand men at this time. He was sent to Tashkent in 1918 ostensibly on a peace and trade mission, but in reality of course, to eavesdrop on Bolshevik moves. The story of his extraordinary adventures on Bolshevik territory, his hairbreadth escapes and chilling brushes with death is to be found in his narrative *Mission to Tashkent* (Hopkirk, STEA 31). While Bailey’s adventures in Bolshevik Central Asia did not contribute significantly to the advance of British interests, he was a vital link in their intelligence services and at one point, was even hired by the Cheka (Bolshevik Secret Service) to track himself down, so adept was he at changing disguises and nationalities. Other names that appear prominently in the history of the resistance to the Bolshevik take-over of Central Asia are those of Osipov and Paul

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5. In the course of his adventures, he had posed as Andre Kekeshi, an Austrian cook cum ex-POW, a Bolshevik agent, a Cheka official, a Rumanian serving in a Hungarian army unit, a civilian Lett named Justus, and finally as Joseph Lazar, a Rumanian coachman in civilian life.
Nazaroff. The latter’s story must be told first if we are to understand Osipov’s role in the Bolshevik holding of Tashkent. Nazaroff was the ringleader of a White Russian plot to overthrow the Bolsheviks in Tashkent and join forces with the British in the west. He was a well-known and well-liked person in his native Tashkent. He had studied zoology in Moscow and geology at the Petrograd Mining Institute and had spent a great deal of his time in looking for minerals in the Tien-Shan mountain range. He was also an authority on the flora, fauna and native peoples of Central Asia. As his luck would have it, someone betrayed him to the Tashkent Soviet authorities, and he was caught and sentenced to death, from which, however, he was miraculously saved by the temporary successful overthrow of the Tashkent Government by Osipov. Osipov was himself a fanatical Bolshevik, but he had seen in the imminent White uprising in Tashkent an opportunity to replace the Soviet agency there with his own personal regime. Anyway it was his active participation in the White uprising against the Tashkent Bolsheviks that saved Nazaroff from the firing squad. But the triumph of the Whites was short lived, for the infuriated Bolsheviks staged a bloody come-back, and Osipov fled the scene, in the direction of Bokhara, having first helped himself to several million rubles (in gold bullion) from the bank in Tashkent. What became
of him is not known, and accounts of his end are conflicting (Hopkirk, STEA 49). Nazaroff, meanwhile, having escaped with his life, was reduced to fleeing across Central Asia from the bloodthirsty Cheka like a hunted animal. In his remarkable work *Hunted Through Central Asia*, his flight from the Cheka agents baying after his trail is described, together with hair-raising escapades, and his itinerant life among various ethnic peoples of the Central Asia that he knew and loved so well.

The general unease and political uncertainty in Central Asia around the 1920’s gave rise to cross-currents of individual quests for power, driven by personal ambition, after the manner of Osipov. One name that luridly stands out in this context is that of Roman Nicolaus Fyodorovich von Ungern-Sternberg, born in 1887 of a long line of Baltic soldier-barons, who, he claimed, were direct descendants of Attila the Hun. As Hopkirk aptly puts it, fighting was the family’s principal business (STEA 124), and Baron Ungern-Sternberg was no exception. With a number of stories bordering on legend about his initial career,

6. It is one of the primary texts discussed in a forthcoming chapter.
he had obtained a commission in a Cossack cavalry regiment in 1908 and had commanded Mongol horsemen in the 1911 clash between Mongolia and China. During his four-year stay there, he became very attached to the Mongols, their land and way of life, and adopted their religion, Lamaistic Buddhism. This military career, though brilliant on the field, was blotted by various scandalous episodes, some of which are mentioned in Hopkirk's work (STEA 125). It also becomes clear from his exploits that he was totally unstable of mind. Perhaps it was this insanity that prompted him to plan an invasion of the Chinese-occupied Mongolia, with an army of ex-White troops and Mongols, and effect the re-establishment of Bogdo Khan, the blind 'Living Buddha' on the throne in Urga the capital. He also planned to recreate a Mongol empire like that of the legendary Genghiz Khan, whose reincarnation he believed himself to be, and sweep across Russia, freeing people from the Bolshevik terror. His plans fitted in very neatly with the Japanese creed of "Asia for the Asians", and their open hatred of the Bolsheviks. With their support,

7. This religion has soothsayers and the occult as intrinsic dimensions.

8. In cultural terms, equivalent to the Tibetan Dalai Lama.
together with a few thousand white Russians, Mongols and other Asiatics, he led an army into Mongolia in 1920 (Hopkirk, STEA 127). Despite four attempts at invading Urga, he was driven back by the Chinese, who were well prepared for his coming. He advanced on Urga again in January 1921, after his proposal to the Chinese to join forces with him against the Bolsheviks had been rejected. This time, after a near-defeat, he clutched Urga with both his bloodstained hands and held on to it with the tenacity of a madman. In May 1921, convinced of his military genius, he proclaimed himself Emperor of all Russia. With an ever-increasing faith in soothsayers and prophecies, he visited various Buddhist temples to pray for victory over the heathen Bolsheviks. In his mind Bolsheviks and Jews were equally abominable and his hatred of the latter surpassed even that of Hitler's. Hopkirk mentions the work of Dr. Ossendowski (a Polish geologist who accompanied the mad Baron on his religious visits) called *Beasts, Men and Gods*. In it is to be found a graphic description of the Baron's last days (Hopkirk, STEA 143). His initial foray into Soviet territory proved unsuccessful, but in the second attempt the Baron's forces committed unheard-of atrocities on the Reds and the thousands of innocents who were in their power. But retribution was not long in coming. Soon Urga was in Bolshevik hands, the Mongols themselves
having invited them in, to be rid of their tormentor. So it was that Mongolia was the first country after Russia to turn Communist: in Hopkirk’s words, Mongolia had been handed to Lenin on a plate (Hopkirk, STEA 148). The Baron himself was sentenced to death a dozen times over at the Soviet Supreme Court in Novosibirsk (Siberia) and put before a Red Army firing squad on September 15, 1921. His death came exactly as his fate had foretold at the shrine of Prophecies at Urga, in one hundred and thirty days. Though the Civil War was supposedly over in the 1920’s, the Bolshevik Revolution and its attendant violence had given birth to a peculiar breed of mankind: the basmachi, native half-patriots, half-brigands, who held their own space between the triumphing Reds and the defeated Whites. They were all Muslims to a man, determined to drive out the godless Bolsheviks from their holy lands. The Bolsheviks’ brutal sacking of the ancient Khanate of Khokand in 1918 had enraged the entire Central Asian Muslim population. Hopkirk describes them as being part-time rebels: peasants by day and guerrillas at night (Hopkirk, STEA 153). Their major handicap was that they lacked unity and a single strong leader. While their struggle with the Bolsheviks continued, Lenin himself had decided to take a frightening gamble, in order to break the basmachi element and bring the Muslims back to Bolshevik thinking. The man he
chose for this daunting task was Enver Pasha, a Turkish general who had to flee his country following its defeat in the war against the Allies which he had led. Enver Pasha proposed to Lenin that in exchange for his own reinstatement in Turkey, he would deliver British India into Bolshevik hands. His secret plans of course, were vastly different: that a temporary alliance with the Bolsheviks would help him realise his own dream, that of a great new Pan-Turkic Empire from Constantinople to Mongolia, uniting all the peoples and tribes of Turkish ancestry. Russian Turkestan was tacitly included in this grandiose plan. And when Moscow signed a treaty in 1921 with his arch enemy Kemal Ataturk, Enver had made up his mind to double-cross the Bolsheviks. Anyhow, the unsuspecting Lenin sent Enver to Russian Central Asia, thinking that he could win the basmachi around to the Bolshevik cause. Enver lost no time in making contact with the basmachi in Bokhara, which was in Bolshevik grip by then and winning them around to his own cause. As for the basmachi, here was the long-awaited brave leader they needed to start their holy war against the godless Bolsheviks. Enver also won the whole-hearted support of the deposed Emir of Bokhara (who had his own troubles, hiding from the
Bolsheviks) and managed to capture Dushanbe⁹ in 1922. His daring foray into Bokhara itself caught the attention of Amanullah, the King of Afghanistan, who now began to view Enver as an instrument for the realisation of his own dream – a Central Asian Confederacy, with himself as leader. With his own goals in mind, the King began to supply Enver with military aid, despite Bolshevik protests. When they realised how Enver had duped them, his capture, dead or alive, became the top priority for the Bolsheviks in Turkestan. In a bloody all-out rout, Enver met his end in a fierce clash with the Red troops that had surrounded his own forces in the village of Abiderya in 1922. So ended the career of another would-be ruler of all Muslim Asia.

The Red Revolution had a sudden check in its mad careening all over Central Asia with the unexpected death of its helmsman Lenin, in 1923. His powerful right-hand man Stalin fought with two rivals, Zinoviev and Trotsky, for the nation’s leadership, with Stalin ultimately winning. After consolidating his personal power in the 1920’s, he turned his attention to China. The Soviet flirtation with China had started

⁹. The capital of present-day Tadjikistan.
way back in 1911 with the fall of the Manchu dynasty and the outbreak of civil war in the country. The last thing that Stalin wanted after the final crushing of the Central Asian basmachi was another Muslim uprising from Chinese quarters (Sinkiang was full of Chinese Muslims). Unknown to General Ma (the last of a series of men who dreamt of a pan-Islamic Central Asia) who was terrorizing Sinkiang at the time, the first Red Army crossed into China in 1933. They defeated Ma’s forces in Urumchi, the capital of Sinkiang. Through various puppet officials in Chinese Central Asia, the Soviet tentacles spread from Hami in the east to Kashgar and Yarkand in the west. Throughout the 1930’s and 40’s the Soviets posed a real threat to the British defence chiefs in India. Things only got more complicated with the outbreak of World War II, in which the natives of British India were innocent pawns. But the British did not have to worry for long. In 1947 the Indian sub-continent freed itself of the colonial British yoke and Britain’s silent tug-of-war with Soviet Russia came to an end. The Soviets’ struggle for dominance in China had ended in victory in 1949. However, a difference in ideology sent the Russians packing soon after, and China reserved its right to practise its own particular brand of Communism. In Hopkirk’s words, the East had stubbornly refused to ignite to the Bolshevik torch (Hopkirk, STEA 240).
It is worthwhile to consider what became of Central Asia in Stalin’s hands. Under his regime (Russia and Central Asia) all of Soviet territory came to be reorganized into fifteen different republics, to form the totalitarian state we knew as the USSR. It was under Stalin that Russian Central Asia came to be organized into five republics – Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tadjikistan – with no heed for cultural and ethnic boundaries. The Stalinist era also saw only a trickle of authorized foreign contact for both Russians and non-Russians alike within the USSR. All free political and cultural contact with the outside world was hermetically sealed off by the Iron Curtain.

Waves of mass terror occasioned by Stalin’s purges and liquidation tactics gripped the Soviet population. The histories of the once-ethnic populations of Russia came to be forcibly rewritten, and presented as mere preludes to the ultimate formation of the Soviet state. This enforced uniformity continued to wield considerable influence long after Stalin’s death in 1953, and could be seen in its element in three specific instances: the drastic change from Arabic to Cyrillic script throughout Central Asia (along with the rest of Soviet Russia) which cut off most access to past literature and culture; the redrawing of boundaries and mass deportations
and relocations to undercut any major groupings that might pose a threat to the Soviet state; collectivization of farmlands, a drive that had begun in the 1930’s and one of the main causes of the basmachi rebellion. The thrust of this policy was “... to use Central Asia as a kind of contiguous Third World which mined and grew raw materials but did not process them” (Dawisha et. al. Russia and the New States of Eurasia 48 Hereafter RNSE).

The typically imperialist attitude of the Tsarist regime towards Central Asia was thus carried on by the Bolsheviks, together with its “civilizing mission” which would ultimately ensure Soviet standards all over the USSR, in all aspects of life (Dawisha et. al. RNSE 48). The three decades which made up the post-Stalin era had their own advantages to the Soviet state, as well as drawbacks. Stalin’s successors were Khrushchev and Brezhnev, who allowed some authority to percolate from Moscow to the Central Asian Soviet republics. They also permitted a partial correction of the Stalinist distortion of national histories and cultures. The “post-Stalin thaw” (Dawisha et. al. RNSE 14) also saw a steady improvement in the standard of living, throughout the 1960’s and 70’s.
But these years of the Soviet heyday were not without their political flaws: with the help of the KGB, there was an almost total eradication of religion and forced ethnic merging. Every man was firstly and lastly, a Soviet citizen. By the late 1970’s, the international image of Soviet Russia had become badly tarnished, despite Soviet attempts to show up Central Asian republics as having made great economic strides forward.

With Gorbachev’s taking over at the helm of the Soviet state, came the introduction of glasnost and perestroika. These concepts of liberalisation and free trade were instituted in great faith, but only hastened the erosion of the Soviet system. As one analyst put it: “rampant glasnost effectively transformed the Soviet Union into a criminal state” (Dawisha et. al. RNSE 19). These policies which were set in motion to contain the internal political and economic forces that were tearing the Soviet state apart, ultimately turned out to be a deadly error, in a long line of political mistakes. The dissolution of the Soviet Union “reached a watershed” at the end of 1990 (Dawisha et. al. RNSE 21). In January 1991 came a military crackdown in the Baltic states, apparently flagged off by Gorbachev in a desperate bid to contain the continuing political disintegration. The effects of glasnost had totally undermined an
apparently invincible system. Boris Yeltsin, Gorbachev’s critic and political rival, had championed the liberal nationalist cause, and declared the dissolution of the USSR in December 1991. With it came the formation of the CIS, (Commonwealth of Independent States), in which most Central Asian republics joined, to face a new era whose uncertainties continue today.

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