

# PROCEEDINGS OF THE CENTRAL ASIAN SOCIETY

## ANNUAL MEETING OF THE CENTRAL ASIAN SOCIETY

*Wednesday, June 12, 1907*

### THE STRATEGIC POSITION OF RUSSIA IN CENTRAL ASIA

BY

MR. DAVID FRASER

*Read June 12, 1907*

LONDON

CENTRAL ASIAN SOCIETY, 22, ALBEMARLE STREET, W.

1907



Proceedings of the Central Asian  
Society.

---

ANNUAL MEETING OF THE CENTRAL  
ASIAN SOCIETY,

*WEDNESDAY, JUNE 12, 1907*

THE STRATEGIC POSITION OF RUSSIA  
IN CENTRAL ASIA

BY  
MR. DAVID FRASER

*READ JUNE 12, 1907*



# ANNUAL MEETING OF THE CENTRAL ASIAN SOCIETY,

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 12, 1907

## GENERAL REPORT FOR THE SESSION 1906-1907.

THE Hon. Secretary read the following report :

The session of 1906-1907 commenced with a meeting on November 7, at which Mr. Valentine Chirol read a paper on 'Panislamism.' This was followed by papers from :

Mr. F. A. McKenzie, December 12, 1906 : 'Colonial Policy of Japan in Korea.'

Mr. A. J. Dunn, January 9, 1907 : 'British Interests in the Persian Gulf.'

Sir Frederic Fryer, K.C.S.I., February 13, 1907 : 'Tribes on the Frontier of Burma.'

General Sir Thomas Gordon, K.C.B., K.C.I.E., C.S.I., March 13, 1907 : 'Reform Movement in Persia.'

W. Rickmer Rickmers, March 27, 1907 : 'Impressions of the Duab, Russian Turkestan.'

Major C. D. Bruce, April 24, 1907 : 'Chinese Turkestan.'

These papers have all been published and circulated amongst the members.

Since January, 1906, the beginning of our financial year, we have elected twenty-seven new members—

Colonel Bailward.  
Major R. A. E. Benn.  
Sir W. Cunningham, K.C.S.I.  
The Right Hon. Lord Curzon  
of Kedleston, G.C.S.I.,  
G.C.I.E.

H. R. E. Dobbs, Esq.  
The Right Hon. Sir Mortimer  
Durand, G.C.M.G.,  
K.C.S.I.  
Captain Elsmie.  
Sir Frederic Fryer, K.C.S.I.

Colonel St. John Michell Fancourt, C.B.	Captain C. B. Stokes. E. J. Salano, Esq.
General Sir Matthew Gosset, K.C.B.	Major Percy Sykes. Hugh Rose Troup, Esq.
T. O. Hughes, Esq. The India Office.	Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Henry Trotter, K.C.M.G., C.B.
Sir Walter Laurence, Bart., G.C.I.E.	Sir Arthur Trevor, K.C.S.I. General Sir J. Luther Vaughan, G.C.B.
Colonel Sir H. McMahon, K.C.I.E., C.S.I.	Major Clive Wigram. Lieutenant-Colonel Wingate.
Captain W. E. O'Connor. Colonel Pemberton. G. J. S. Scovell, Esq.	Mrs. C. E. Yate.

But we regret that we have in the same period received seven resignations—

Mrs. Barnard.	W. Merk, Esq.
A. R. Colquhoun, Esq.	The Hon. A. Pelham.
Sir Reginald Cust.	Major Tighe.
F. Gillett, Esq.	

In this report mention must be made of the first annual dinner, which took place on May 16 at the Imperial Restaurant. Our chairman, Sir Edwin Collen, presided, and twenty-four members dined. Miss Hughes, Secretary of the Royal Asiatic Society, and Dr. Scott Keltie, Secretary of the Royal Geographical Society, to whom the Central Asian Society owe a debt of gratitude for their ever-ready help, honoured us by being our guests on that evening. The chairman (Sir Edwin Collen), Sir Alfred Lyall, Sir Mortimer Durand, Sir Thomas Holdich, Dr. Scott Keltie, Lord Ronaldshay, and Dr. Cotterell Tupp, were among the speakers.

Our members now number 118, and it is gratifying to note that we are gaining in strength.

The publication of papers, which has been regular during the past session, adds an attraction to the Society. We feel that if it is widely known, many who take an

interest in Eastern politics would be glad to join. The co-operation of members in obtaining recruits for the Society is very desirable.

A new move has been made in the general meeting this year, and Mr. David Fraser will show us after tea some photographs which should be of interest to the Society.

The Council nominate the following gentlemen to form the Council for the coming session :

CHAIRMAN.

Valentine Chirol, Esq.

VICE-PRESIDENTS.

Lieutenant-General Sir Edwin Collen, G.C.I.E., C.B.

General Sir Thomas Gordon, K.C.B., K.C.I.E., C.S.I.

Colonel Sir Thomas Holdich, K.C.I.E., K.C.M.G., C.B.

Right Hon. Sir Alfred Lyall, G.C.I.E., K.C.B., D.C.L.

Lord Lamington, G.C.M.G., G.C.I.E.

Colonel Sir Francis Younghusband, K.C.I.E.

HON. TREASURER.

A. Cotterell Tupp, I.C.S., LL.D.

HON. SECRETARY.

E. Penton, jun., Esq.

MEMBERS OF COUNCIL.

Earl of Donoughmore.

T. Hart-Davies, M.P., I.C.S.

Right Hon. Sir Mortimer Durand, G.C.M.G.

W. Irvine, I.C.S.

H. F. B. Lynch, Esq.

Ian Malcolm, Esq.

Earl of Ronaldshay.

Colonel C. E. Yate, C.S.I., C.M.G.

The Hon. Treasurer, Dr. Cotterell Tupp, then presented the statement of accounts for the year 1906-1907.

## CENTRAL ASIAN ACCOUNTS, 1906.

RECEIPTS.	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.
Subscriptions ...	94	0	0			
" in arrears ...	6	0	0			
" in advance ...	3	0	0			
" in error ...	1	0	0			
By sale of <i>Proceedings</i> ...	3	11	6			
			<hr style="width: 50%; margin-left: 0;"/>	107	11	6
Balance at bank, January 1, 1906 ...				37	4	1
" petty cash, January 1, 1906 ...				1	8	10

---

  
£146 4 5

EXPENDITURE.	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.
Rent ...	20	0	0			
Salary ...	25	0	0			
<i>Proceedings</i> —Printing ...	28	11	0			
" Reporting ...	16	7	0			
" Illustrations, maps, etc.	6	16	0			
Miscellaneous printing, stationery, etc. ...	10	18	0			
Subscriptions refunded ...	1	0	0			
Bank charges ...	0	7	4			
Petty cash ...	15	2	8			
			<hr style="width: 50%; margin-left: 0;"/>	124	12	0
Balance at bank, December 31, 1906 ...				20	16	3
" petty cash, December 31, 1906 ...				0	16	2
				<hr style="width: 50%; margin-left: 0;"/>	£146	4 5

Compared with the vouchers and accounts, and found correct,

WILLIAM IRVINE.  
J. KENNEDY.

June 12, 1907.



THE CHAIRMAN (Lieutenant-General Sir Edwin Collen) said :

It is sometimes the case at the annual general meeting of a society that the chairman delivers a long address, reviewing the state of affairs and the progress of knowledge in respect to the particular objects of the body over which he presides. But on this occasion I shall only claim your attention for a few moments. And I think you will agree with me that there are several excellent reasons for brevity, the chief one being that we have a lecture awaiting us after a short interval.

I venture to hope that we may consider that the good work which has been done by this Society in the past, has been well sustained during the session which is now coming to a close. We have had many admirable and instructive lectures. The great subject of Panislamism was dealt with by Mr. Chirol; the Reform Movement in Persia and British Interests in the Persian Gulf by Sir Thomas Gordon and Mr. Dunn respectively; papers on Russian and Chinese Turkestan were read by Mr. Rickmers and Major Bruce; and we are now about to listen to one by Mr. Fraser on the Strategic Position of Russia in Central Asia; and if we have gone farther afield in those by Sir Frederic Fryer on the Frontier Tribes of Burma, and by Mr. McKenzie on the Policy of Japan in Korea, we must remember that our somewhat wide and comprehensive title embraces many matters connected with the supremacy of British power in the East, and that Japan is responsible with us for the peace of Asia.

Our discussions, too, have been of remarkable interest, and I desire to tender to all who contributed papers or took part in our debates a most cordial expression of our gratitude.

It has not been our ambition to make this Society a

large one, but to strengthen its position we require more members, and I trust that in the coming year we may receive an accession of numbers from statesmen, administrators, soldiers, and travellers, and others who are interested in our Eastern power.

I count myself extremely fortunate in that Lord Curzon, who has the highest knowledge and greatest grasp of what we comprehensively term Central Asian politics, has joined our Society during my year of office, and I know that this announcement will be received with extreme satisfaction by all of us. It is also a matter for congratulation that we can reckon among our new members men who have distinguished themselves in diplomacy in East and West, in administration, and in arms. I trust that every member of the Society will endeavour to extend our usefulness by increasing the numbers in our ranks.

I wish, in conclusion, to take this opportunity of expressing my grateful thanks to my colleagues in Council and the hon. secretary and treasurer, to the secretary, and to the members generally for their valuable assistance during my term of office.

Our new chairman, Mr. Valentine Chirol, is well known as a traveller, writer, and student of Eastern affairs, and as holding an important post in connection with foreign affairs, and we may all confidently look forward to the continued progress and development of our Society under his rule.

The report was then put to the vote and carried.

A vote of thanks to Sir Edwin Collen for his very efficient services as Chairman during the session was proposed by Mr. Irvine, and carried unanimously.

After an interval for tea the meeting reassembled, and a paper was read on 'The Strategic Position of Russia in Central Asia.'

# THE STRATEGIC POSITION OF RUSSIA IN CENTRAL ASIA

BY  
MR. DAVID FRASER

THE CHAIRMAN, LIEUTENANT-GENERAL SIR EDWIN COLLEN, said: Mr. David Fraser, who is about to give us a short paper on 'The Strategic Position of Russia in Central Asia,' and afterwards to illustrate his travels through Central Asia and Persia by means of lantern-slides, has certainly had a varied experience. He went with Lumsden's Horse from India to South Africa, and he may claim to have made a very rapid and practical acquaintance with military affairs. He had his horse killed in action by a shell, a second horse was shot under him, and he was then taken prisoner while senseless from the fall of the second horse. He represented the *Times* with General Kuroki in 1904 and General Nogi in 1905, and his excellent letters on the fighting in Manchuria must have been read by many present. He has also recorded his war experiences in a very interesting and well-written book entitled 'A Modern Campaign.' I will now ask Mr. Fraser to read his paper.

The paper was as follows:

MR. CHAIRMAN, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,—As the time at my disposal is limited, I will refrain from any description of the journey in Central Asia, from which I have recently returned, and will merely remark that it included the countries of Thibet, Chinese Turkestan, Russian Turkestan, and Persia. These regions constitute what might be termed lines exterior to the defences of India, and upon their importance to our

great eastern possession it is unnecessary to dilate. My excuse for presuming to address you upon so large a subject is that it is some considerable time since a British traveller has been allowed to enter Russian Turkestan, and that even confirmation of what is already known may be welcomed by those who closely follow events in Central Asia. In the briefest manner, then, I propose to recapitulate the situation as I personally understand it, mentioning at the same time a few items of information which may be new to members of the Society.

So much has been written about Thibet in recent times that it is not necessary to enter into a discussion of the strategic facilities which it offers to a Russian army. A squadron of Cossacks might easily reach the banks of the Tsang-po, the Thibetan name for the Brahmaputra River, and from there operate against the plains of Bengal. In the same way, perhaps, a regiment of Cossacks might come down the trade route through Ladakh and threaten the Punjab. From the Pamirs a handful of men might advance through Gilgit and make a demonstration against Srinagar. An attempt to invade India by any of these three routes need not, however, cause any more anxiety to India than would be caused to the man in the moon if some belligerent person on earth pointed a gun at him. Trifling outposts in time of war would be quite sufficient to prevent any military activity in these regions, and as regards their practical value as factors in the Russian strategic position in Central Asia, they may be left out of consideration. Russia's position on the Persian frontier is almost of equally small value as regards any schemes which may be afoot for the conquest of India. There was a time when Khorasan, that province occupying the extreme north-east corner of Persia, lay directly in the line of the Russian advance

towards Herat and Kandahar. But the extension of the Transcaspian Railway has left the Persian frontier far in rear, and Khorasan is no longer any more than a minor factor in the situation. Nor need the case of Seistan be considered, for it is valueless to any army in its present condition, and could only become important were a great strategic railway constructed, and after years spent in the development of its resources.

Nothing could be simpler than the broad strategic problem that presents itself in Central Asia. Every thing east of the Pamirs, and every thing west of Merv, may be left out of consideration altogether, and it is necessary only to concentrate attention on that portion of Turkestan which directly faces the Afghan border. It is only from this section of her frontier, about 600 miles long, that Russia can hope to operate. An examination of the conditions proves not only that she is completely committed to this front, but that she cannot well diverge from lines of advance beginning at two particular and easily ascertainable points.

It is hardly necessary to explain the significance of the Russian railway system in this region. Central Asia is a vast desert in which water is extremely scarce, where proper roads are non-existent, and where oases of cultivation occur at rare and distant intervals. I venture to express the opinion that Central Asia twenty-five years ago was quite impracticable to any army of a size sufficient seriously to threaten our frontier in India. I am aware that distinguished people have held different opinions, among them Napoleon, Skobelev, and others. Unfortunately, there is not time now to present arguments in support of this view, and I will content myself with bringing to your remembrance the history of the Russian conquest of the Turcomans, which culminated in



the Battle of Geok Tepe in the year 1881. Twice before the expedition which ended so successfully had Russia endeavoured to crush the Turcomans, and twice she had failed, not because her forces could not beat the Turcomans in battle, but because she was not able to bring her troops into the field in a proper state of equipment. Skobelef saw that the difficulty was transport, and it was he who asked for a light railway, and with its aid gained a brilliant victory where formerly every attempt had ended in disaster. If a nomad tribe could not be brought to bay without a railway to back up the expeditionary force, how much less could the Russians, unaided by railways, expect successfully to invade India ?

That light railway from the Caspian to the scene of the Geok Tepe tragedy has grown and grown, until to-day it looms large and ominous in the eyes of India. The economic value of Russian Turkestan is very small, and it is perfectly clear that the millions of money that have been spent upon railways were expended for strategic purposes. Expressed briefly, the effect of these railways has been to bridge every difficulty and overcome every obstacle which lies between Russia proper and the Indian political frontier. It is a fact that but for one short section of railway, which might be built in a few months, Russia is able to put on the Afghan border an army of almost unlimited dimensions. When we think what the single line of the Siberian Railway did in the late war, we cannot afford to ignore the potentialities of the Central Asian system.

Within the last few years there has arisen from time to time rumours of heavy reinforcement of the Russian army in Turkestan. The declaration of war between Russia and Japan, the latter an ally of ourselves, was the signal for alarmist reports regarding the massing of troops

where their presence, if those reports were correct, could have no other object than the menacing of our position in India. As there has always seemed to be some doubt as to the exact numbers of the troops in Turkestan, I am glad to be able to show you a table which sets forth not only the numbers, but the location of practically every Russian soldier in the country.

In the beginning of 1904 it was obvious that trouble with Japan might spread until the ally of Japan was involved, and so the garrison of Central Asia was slightly augmented as a precautionary measure. From the tabular statement it will be seen that, to bring the forces in Turkestan up to war strength, an increase of 40,000 men from the reserve is necessary. Of these, half were available from the settled Russian community in Central Asia, and as they were practically already on the spot, they were not called upon. The other 20,000, however, were actually brought from Russia and attached to their respective battalions, a proportion of which were thus brought up to war strength. It was, however, quickly realized that the belligerents were to be allowed to fight it out alone, without the intervention of European Powers, whereupon Russia ceased to reinforce the garrison of Turkestan. The maximum number of troops was reached in the spring of 1904, and probably never exceeded 75,000. By the summer of the same year the 20,000 men brought from Russia were absorbed in the regular establishments, and the total had sunk to the original level of some 60,000. At no subsequent period has the garrison of Central Asia been augmented. The question of the troops now in Central Asia, however, is of comparatively minor importance. What is evident to the student of the situation is that the present garrison is a factor of small importance, and that the railway system

is the supreme factor in any schemes which may exist for the conquest of India.

The railway question may easily be comprehended by a glance at the map. From Krasnovodsk, on the eastern shores of the Caspian Sea, to Orenburg, in the extreme south-east of Russia proper, extends a single line measuring 2,300 miles in length. From Merv, on the main railway, depends a branch-line terminating at Kushk. From Cherniaievo, on the main line, another branch runs to Andijan. The significance of the system lies in the fact that it is directly connected with the railway systems of European Russia, and that troops from any part of the Empire can be railed and landed absolutely upon the Afghan border. Orenburg is the point of junction between the railway systems of Russia proper and the Trans-Siberian Railway, so that the new line to Tashkent not only brings European Russia into touch with Central Asia, but forms a link with the Far East. Krasnovodsk, on the Caspian, has steamer communication with Baku, which is in direct railway communication with Moscow, and is also connected by rail with Batoum on the Black Sea. Krasnovodsk is thus within two days' journey of the large Russian garrison in the Caucasus, as well as being conveniently connected with Russia proper. Taking Merv as the centre of military possibilities in Central Asia, we find that it is distant from Moscow by the Orenburg-Tashkent line 2,700 miles, and by the Caspian Sea route 2,200 miles.

A study of the railway system shows that it is incomplete, for the branch from Merv to Kushk would be quite incapable of dealing with arrivals from both ends of the main line. The Kushk branch can deal with men and supplies from the Caspian, but another advanced base must be found for arrivals from Orenburg. The Oren-



burg-Tashkent line having been opened quite recently, it has not yet been supplemented by another branch from the main line to the Afghan border. It is practically certain that Termez must be the other point at which Russia will establish an advanced base. At present Termez is connected with Samarcand by a good military road, as well as by the water route on the Oxus. But the latter is of very small practical value, and it may almost certainly be assumed that until Termez is linked by rail to the main line Russia could not deploy her full strength on the Oxus. Several schemes for construction of a branch to Termez have been mooted, one running along the Oxus from Charjui, another from Samarcand through Karshi. The latter, I believe, is the one that has been decided upon, but I have very good reasons for stating that not a single rail of this line has been laid, and that there is no immediate intention of commencing construction.

Nevertheless, the Samarcand-Termez extension is the natural consequence of the Orenburg-Tashkent line, and its construction doubtless waits only upon financial considerations. It is extremely improbable that Russia would attempt any southward movement while this branch remains unbuilt. Whether Russian aggressiveness is dead, or only sleeping, will be infallibly indicated by the progress of events in respect of the Termez line. At present the project, so far as I could gather, is dead, and has ceased to be a subject of conversation in Turkestan, though at one time the matter was eagerly discussed, and the construction of the line supposed to foreshadow military activity in the near future.

As regards the present condition of the Central Asian railways, it is evident that Russia is keeping them up to standard. Many sections of the line are being re-

embanked, culverts are being fitted where experience has shown them to be desirable, and sleepers are being renewed at a very great number of points. But we need not forget that the standard of efficiency in Central Asia is very different from European standards, and that the weight of the rails and the method of fixing them to sleepers, the ballasting of the line, and the quality of the rolling-stock, is all very far below what is regarded as necessary to a railway in Europe. The condition of the permanent way will always militate against high speed and heavy traffic, but the question of rolling-stock is unimportant, for the whole resources of the Russian Empire are available to Central Asia, via Orenburg. There is a great deal to be said about the low carrying capacity of the railways in Central Asia, but when allowances have been made for all contingencies, there remains the outstanding fact that it will be possible in time of war for at least twelve trains per diem to arrive at each of two points of concentration. One requires to have very small knowledge of military affairs to realize that twenty-four trains per day will bring into the field, and maintain there, an army of many hundreds of thousands of men.

Speculation in regard to the future is always attractive, and in connection with war it becomes positively fascinating. In view of recent political developments, war is a remote probability in Central Asia; but if, unhappily, events should ever lead up to it, we may be tolerably certain that Russia would be the aggressor, and that her first step would be a dash upon Herat. The garrison of Herat consists of six battalions of infantry, plus a fair proportion of artillery. From all that can be heard of the Afghan army, we may conclude that its fighting value is much below that of any European army, and we may also assume that the best organized, best armed, and best

disciplined troops of the Ameer are not stationed so far away from his capital as at Herat. At Kushk, on the other hand, the whole of the garrison of Central Asia is within thirty hours' journey by train, and a column could be concentrated there, flung upon Herat, and have commenced shelling the citadel before it was known in Kabul or Quetta that the Russians were on the move.

Who can doubt that the Afghans would be driven out long before reinforcements could reach them? At Kushk there is stationed a field railway company, and stored there are materials for the construction of a light railway to Herat. From Kushk to Herat there is no obstacle to the speedy establishment of a small line, and there can be no doubt that within a few days of the appearance of the Russian forces their position would be strengthened by through railway communication. The people dwelling in Afghan Turkestan are known to be akin to their neighbours north of the Oxus, and they are also known to cherish a deadly hatred of the Afghans, who rule over them with a ruthlessness entirely Oriental in character. Russian rule in Turkestan is easy and tolerant, and an army in the field would have nothing to fear from the natives in rear, or from those encountered on the northern slopes of the Afghan plateau.

At Termez, in the east, there exists an immediate obstruction to advance, for here the Oxus runs too wide and deep to be forded. But the Russians have stationed at Termez a pontoon train, and the throwing together of a bridge would only be a matter of a few hours. How long it would take a column to dash forward and secure a position on the Hindu Kush, which would command Kabul, is a matter for conjecture. But we cannot look at the map and remain satisfied that British columns would be certain to win the race that must ensue for

possession of the all-important strategic line formed by this range of mountains.

What we have to contemplate in regard to the defence of India is that the initial advantages must lie with our enemy. It is perfectly apparent that Russia can occupy Herat whenever she chooses, and my humble opinion is that, once Russia is established there, we can never turn her out. If India were solid behind us, we could look upon the occupation of Herat with equanimity, and wait contentedly at Kandahar for the Russian forces to exhaust themselves marching 400 miles across deserts to attack us. But we are pledged to fight for the integrity of Afghanistan, and all Asia would be watching to see if we were able to fulfil our pledge. While we remained quiescent at Kandahar—for it would be absolutely futile to attempt to recover Herat—the power of the Ameer would crumble away before Russian intrigue; that hornets' nest of brigands upon the North-West Frontier would be buzzing about our communications; and behind us there is India, seething with sedition, and, in some parts, ripe for mischief.

The problem before our military authorities is not so much how to defend India from Russian armies, but how to deal with the situation that would arise were Russia to seize Herat and commence mobilizing in Central Asia. We are the legatees of a policy that pledges us to non-interference with, and yet to the defence of, the same State. This same State will not allow the nose of an engineer or an intelligence officer to cross the border. Yet the moment Afghanistan feels the pinch we must up and protect her. Even to get to her we must pass through a region over which we have almost no control, and which is inhabited by hordes of warlike, treacherous and bloodthirsty ruffians, who would require to be

watched by a large army. If what we have recently seen of the temper of some of our subjects in India may be considered as an earnest of what to expect in the future, then in time of war every outlying station in the country will require military protection, and every railway will have to be patrolled throughout its length. There will, indeed, be no end to the opportunities for employment of troops in duties far other than fighting the enemy.

We have, however, two reasons for thankfulness. When the Russians have gained their initial successes so soon begin their difficulties, for in front of them lie desert regions devoid practically of everything required by a marching army. A long time must elapse before our defensive line could be attacked. Then there is the agreement between ourselves and Russia, which has been so long in the hatching. This document will probably be signed within the next few weeks, and we may be confident that its terms will include provision for the amelioration of a situation that in itself is of the utmost gravity, both to Russia and to ourselves.

MR. FRASER then exhibited and briefly described nearly a hundred lantern-slides of photographs taken during his recent travels in Central Asia and Persia. At their conclusion,

THE CHAIRMAN said: We have listened to a paper which has compressed, and I venture to think very successfully, some of the leading points of this great subject. And the value of the paper has certainly been enhanced by the series of interesting pictures which has just been shown. I am very much in agreement with many of Mr. Fraser's statements and opinions, and I think we may sleep in peace, and may run the risk of a squadron of Cossacks operating on the Brahmaputra from Thibet, or invading India through Ladakh or Gilgit. Last year I read a paper before the Society on 'The Defence of India,' and those who have read it will readily understand that I agree with Mr.



Fraser in regard to the contraction of Russia's strategic front. It is long enough, in all conscience, and we need not extend it by suggesting—as I have seen it gravely stated to be the opinion of 'high military authority'—that Chitral is the vital and dangerous spot in our line of defence. Mr. Fraser has given a concise account of the Russian railways, and a fair appreciation of their strength and weakness. I am very glad, as I am sure you all are, that he has exposed the fallacy of recent extravagant estimates of Russia's military strength in Central Asia. I hope we have now done with 'Russian scares' when we hear of troops being moved in relief on the Russian side of Afghanistan.

On the other hand, there are some points upon which I do not entirely agree with the lecturer. I think he has not done justice to our position should war break out, nor does he seem to sufficiently count on the fact that in our alliance with Japan we have a very strong guarantee for the maintenance of peace in Asia. Then, I am inclined to think he was rather too uncomplimentary when he described the frontier tribes of the North-West. It is true, of course, that they are 'bloodthirsty,' and so are a great many other semicivilized people. At any rate, we draw some very admirable soldiers from these tribes. They should be a source of strength rather than of weakness to us. As to the large army which the lecturer suggested we should have to place on our communications if we occupied Afghanistan—that is to say, if we went forward to meet the Russians—I need only remind you that when we were fighting the Afghans thirty years ago a division of about 15,000 men kept the whole of that very long line from Peshawar to Kabul. But perhaps on this matter, and on the question whether Mr. Fraser is right in his exclusion of Persia as a factor in the strategic problem, some members acquainted with local conditions will speak.

DR. BULLOCK WORKMAN said he had no intention to criticize the admirable paper to which they had listened; all he wished to do was to say a few words in regard to the illustrations which touched upon people and scenes with which he and Mrs. Bullock Workman were familiar. In one of the photographs they had seen yaks going over the Khardung Pass. This was one of the highest passes in the world, and it would be interesting to know the effect of the high altitude upon the yaks as compared with the men of the party. Their natural habitat was in these mountains at heights of from 10,000 to 15,000 feet. He and Mrs.

Bullock Workman found in crossing the pass that the yaks suffered a great deal more from the rarification of the atmosphere than themselves or their party. The yaks had to stop every few minutes to recover their breath, although they travelled with extreme care. In the region of the Saseri Pass, which was a huge desert area, but which in summer was a caravan route between Leh and Central Asia, they found the route a veritable equine graveyard. They saw hundreds of skeletons of beasts of burden, and the country looked as though it might have been a huge battlefield. The region was some 15,000 or 16,000 feet high, and there was very little water.

Mr. H. R. SYKES said: I was rather struck with the way in which the lecturer passed over the possibility of a Russian advance by way of Persia. When I was in Seistan some three years ago I met a Russian officer there, and he gave me to understand that the Russians had an elaborate system worked out for a railway from Herat, down the Afghan frontier and through Seistan, to terminate on the coast, somewhere near Gwadar. The line had been surveyed and worked out, but no doubt the McMahan Mission rather put an end to this scheme for the present. There is, however, the question of a line of advance through Persia itself. I do not think there would be great difficulty in parallel columns marching down the country by way of the Gulf. It is essential for us to hold the Gulf in our own hands, for if once the Russians secured a port there it would be a very serious menace to India. If they were to do that, I do not see that there would be any great difficulty in marching through Persia in the same way as marching through Afghanistan, for although you have a series of mountain ranges to meet, they can all be passed, and there are plenty of places on the plateau, such as Kermanshah, Shiraz, etc., where troops could concentrate, and from which they could gradually move forward. Then there is the course on the other side of the Lut towards Seistan. Some time ago Sir Thomas Holdich told this Society that he thought it would be possible to approach India with an army either on the east or the west of Persia.

Mr. FRASER: With regard to the point raised by the last speaker, I would point out that I had no intention of suggesting that it was impossible for a Russian army to advance through Persia. I dealt in my lecture with the strategical position as it exists at present. I think that, as things are now, Russia

is most unlikely to contemplate a forward movement except across the northern frontier of Afghanistan. Everything has been reduced to the simple problem of this frontier, and to approach India through Persia would be to double the distance from existing railway bases. I do not see how Russia could ever think of this route without entire reconstruction of plans, involving the building of a new set of strategic railways. Until she makes new railways she cannot diverge from the line of advance to which she is already committed.

LIEUTENANT-GENERAL SIR J. HILLS-JOHNES said : If Russia made an advance by way of Thibet she would not have any railways there, and could construct none in any reasonable time. I understood, however, at the time of the Thibet Expedition, that we should not have entered upon that campaign had not India really been threatened from that frontier. Is the line of route from the Russian frontier so difficult as to make it impossible for them to send four columns down there, provided we allowed them to do so? We have stopped their doing so by the Treaty of Lhasa ; but why did we go to war with Thibet if the Thibetan frontier can be excluded from consideration in dealing with the safety of India from external invasion?

LIEUTENANT-COLONEL SIR HENRY TROTTER said : It is thirty-three years since I had the good fortune to follow the greater part of the route described by the lecturer when he gave us the lantern views. We went from Leh over the Khardung Pass to the Russian frontier. There were fifty-seven of us, and about a hundred horses, and three or four months before our visit the Maharaja of Kashmir had sent out supplies to all the different points where we should have to halt. But for these arrangements made beforehand it would have been impossible for our large party to have got across at all. It took us nearly a month, marching as hard as we could, although for a great part of the way supplies had been provided months beforehand. Judging from this experience, it would be very difficult to bring troops in any number across these mountains through Leh into Kashmir.

THE CHAIRMAN : We have had a very interesting paper, and the discussion, though not so extended as I had hoped, has been of considerable importance and interest. Such discussions are, I think, extremely valuable. Of course, it may be said that when we are at peace with a great military power we have no business to publicly consider questions as to what would happen were we



at war with them. But that is an abstract theory which is not, I think, followed by any powerful nation in the world; and however friendly we may be with Russia, we should be wrong altogether not to consider the state of things which would exist supposing our relations were strained and their interests were in conflict with ours. I am one of those who believe practically in the possibility of a good understanding with Russia; but at the same time I am a firm believer in the necessity for military preparation, and for the maintenance of the integrity of Afghanistan. Mr. Fraser has drawn a somewhat gloomy picture of what would happen in the event of hostilities, and it is somewhat too gloomy in my view. I do not think it would be possible for Russia to 'dash up' from the Oxus to the Hindu Kush. The difficulties would be enormous, and I am inclined to think that we are apt not to make enough of the power of the Afghans in a position of responsibility. We should give the Afghan army its proper fighting value, and I believe this to be considerable. There can be no doubt that the problem of the defence and security of India is the greatest Imperial military question we have to face. The stronger we are, the greater is the chance of permanent peace. The whole thing, to my mind, resolves itself into the power of this country to reinforce her garrisons in the East. If a nation which a century ago stemmed the tide of Napoleonic victory over Europe cannot produce a sound military organization, or muster sufficient numbers to defend her oversea dominions, then, indeed, we might despair of her destiny. It now only remains for me to convey to Mr. Fraser on your behalf our grateful thanks for the excellent lecture and admirable pictures he has presented to us. (Cheers.)







UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FA



D 000 001 681

