**Title:** Revisiting the ‘Transcaspian Episode’: British Intervention and Turkmen Statehood, 1918-1919

**Word Count:** 11,584

**Abstract:**

At a particular strategic moment (1918-1919) during the First World War, British agents became involved in the politics of Transcaspia, a region then governed by an uneasy coalition of Russian railway workers and Turkmen tribes. This article argues that this ‘Transcaspian Episode’ is a manifestation of a global process of imperial disintegration and the nationalisation of colonial territory with ambivalent external sponsorship. It reveals the role of the British in influencing the fate of Turkmen autonomy and provides an opportunity to contrast the British and Bolshevik treatments of colonised peoples during and after World War One.

**Main Body:**

On 3rd May 1919 General William Montgomerie Thomson of the British Army granted an audience in Tiflis (now Tbilisi) to a certain Khan Yomutski, self-declared leader of the Transcaspian Turkmen.[[1]](#footnote-1) Yomutski claimed to be in a position to speak for the entire Turkmen people in Transcaspia, and used this platform to state that, though this population had sworn allegiance to the Tsar, animosity between Turkmen and Russians was acute, and now that the Tsar had been overthrown the Turkmen sought a future outside of the Russian Empire, an imperial state which had kept them poorly educated and destitute. Their preferred option was the support of a different empire which would ‘enable them to develop and acquire Western Culture’, as Thomson’s notes from the exchange put it. Yomutski therefore implored London to take the Turkmen and their lands under British governance, pledging 40,000-50,000 Turkmen to aid in the consolidation of the area for British occupation. If the British failed to act, Yomutski argued, then the entire Turkmen population of the Transcaspian region, approximately 650,000 people, would migrate south of the River Atrek and into Persian lands, risking overcrowding and abandoning their ancestral homes to evade the Russian yoke whether it came under a Red or White banner.[[2]](#footnote-2)Despite the fact that British sponsorship for Yomutski’s state was not offered, the predicted mass migration southwards never took place, one of various reasons why Yomutski’s claims, and Thomson’s notes on them, should be treated with scepticism. Another was that, as the British and Russians had already learned long ago, it was vanishingly unlikely that Yomutski would be in a position to speak for all Turkmen at that time. Khan Nikolai Nikolaevich Yomutski, a Turkmen with a higher education from Russia, had been a lieutenant colonel in the Tsar’s army (Kadyrov 2013, p. 218). But Yomutski’s background is beside the point. Nobody could speak for all Turkmen with confidence, since most Turkmen’s primary loyalty was to one of many tribes; a single unitary Turkmen identity, perhaps a nationality, was secondary to this. Yet Yomutski’s imaginings of a Turkmen state under British protection was a single example of many such schemes presented to the British in 1918 and 1919 by local tribal elites. It is therefore indicative of what was considered both possible and desirable, or at least bearable, at a moment of rapid and unpredictable change in Transcaspia. Similarly, as General Thomson offered little in the way of commitments to Yomutski’s project, so British agents and institutions during the Russian Civil War repeatedly gave Turkmen contacts a hearing while seldom making unqualified expressions of support. These agents were granted significant personal autonomy by London, but often used this autonomy reactively.

Between 1917 and 1920, Great Powers including the UK received entreaty from, entered into dialogue with or offered support to various transient proto-administrations in the vast territory that had been governed, until February 1917, by Tsar Nicholas II. Some, like the Ukrainian Rada, briefly held manifest power but were uncooperative. Others, like the ‘southern bloc’ coalition of ‘the Caucasus, the Cossack regions, the Ukraine and the unoccupied parts of Rumania’ were figments improvised by foreign agents hoping to stop the Bolshevik surge or control its implications (Ullman 1961, pp. 50, 46, 63). But these agents still contemplated, albeit with varying degrees of earnestness, committing their governments to the maintenance of new administrations and, by implication, the creation of new states with their own or proxy forces. One such administration encountered by the British was based in Ashgabat, capital city of today’s Turkmenistan, and its most formal iteration was titled the Transcaspian Provisional Government. This government was neither independently powerful nor a British fiction. It was dominated by a specific kind of Russian proletariat; those who were not associated with the White Army but who did not trust Vladimir Lenin and hoped to resist the Bolsheviks. It cooperated extensively with British officers operating in and around Russian Turkestan. Only later did the British lose faith in its unsteady coalition and take seriously the proposition of self-governing Turkmen as its replacement.

During the Cold War, as befitted the age, there were two principal narratives regarding British actions in Transcaspia in 1918 and 1919. They developed side-by-side and in opposition to one another. One was put about by Soviet historiography. Despite, or perhaps because of, the range and military power of those involved, including the United States, France and Britain, the intervention of foreign forces in the Russian Civil War ultimately had a more significant impact on the self-understanding and self-presentation of the new Soviet regime than it did on the course of the conflict itself (Shmelev 2003, pp. 87-88). The Soviets identified themselves as encircled by capitalist aggressors, and therefore described the British in Transcaspia as opportunistic looters seeking to annex the region at no one’s invitation but their own (Shteinberg 1951). The other narrative was the British view. It responded to claims of Soviet historians by minimising the importance of the whole campaign, adopting an air of self-deprecation to emphasise the modesty of the mission’s objectives and the failure to efficiently achieve even those. C. H. Ellis, a member of the 1918-1919 Malleson mission to Central Asia (‘Malmiss’), reduced it to an ‘episode’ when retelling the story in 1959.[[3]](#footnote-3) The abortive efforts of Russian railway workers to build a functioning state, the military resistance of political moderates made to seem feeble at an intersection between various much larger forces, and the desperate schemes employed to keep the Transcaspian economy afloat, all contribute to a view of the Transcaspian Episode as an interesting but ignominious British imperial spasm, little more.

At first glance, Khan Yomutski does little to deter this reading. His grand claims belied the unrepresentativeness of his position and the limitations of his power. But Yomutski’s scheme connects the Transcaspian Episode to a story which lasted much longer than Britain’s military commitment to Transcaspia: the story of Turkmen nationhood and Soviet state-building in Central Asia. Pre-Soviet Turkmen identity has received scant attention in English-language scholarship (Clement 2018, p. 4). It might be stated in shorthand that the Transcaspian Province of the Russian Empire was approximate, geographically, to post-Soviet Turkmenistan and its precursor Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic within the USSR. This is not quite accurate. The province extended further to the north and not so far to the east. But Soviet and post-Soviet Turkmenistan was and is based upon the notion of a state representing the Turkmen peoples located in the Transcaspian region. This notion had antecedents before 1917 but hardened, multiplied and made its way into the shared imagination of British and Turkmen decision-makers during the Russian Civil War, before finally manifesting itself in the Soviet ‘national delimitation’ of Central Asia in 1924, in which the separate Turkmen republic emerged from the multi-national Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic conceived in 1920 (Edgar 2004). The notion of Turkmen nationhood brushed past British interests while causing little friction, whereas its encounter with Soviet power would prove utterly transformative, but its journey into and out of British imperial imaginings is worthy of further investigation for the conclusions that this yields.

The conclusions are, first, that British policy in Transcaspia was not predetermined. A more concerted engagement with the Turkmen tribes earlier on in the campaign might have altered its outcome. Nor was British policy without consequence. The presence of British agents and, for a time, British colonial soldiers affected the shape and chronology of Turkmen statecraft at a critical moment in the Transcaspian region. It also forms part of a more geographically dispersed process whereby the British came to support the Basmachi rebels who frustrated Soviet state-building for much of the 1920s. Finally, given the opportunity to compare and contrast the treatment of rebellious tribal peoples by two powers both thought of as imperial, the British Empire and the Soviet Union, we see different understandings and appreciations of ideological and ethno-national difference in the prelude to the global interwar period. In other words, we see the attitude of two global powers towards ethnic minorities during a ‘reconfiguration of world order’ (Gerwarth & Manela 2014, p. 788). The remaining article will seek to substantiate these conclusions by first analysing Britain’s broader strategic considerations during World War One, then by relating British involvement with transient states in Tanscaucasia and Transcaspia, before giving a fuller appraisal of the British-Turkmen relationship at this critical moment in Transcaspian history.

*British Strategic Goals in Transcaspia*

The British intelligence and military presence in the Russian Empire was originally intended ‘to shore up Russian forces fighting against the Central Powers, but after the Soviet government signed a peace treaty in the spring of 1918, British and Allied forces found themselves aligned with counter-revolutionary White Russian elements in an escalating Russian civil war’ (Jeffrey 2010, p. 173). Hopes of fostering a liberal order which would repay Russia’s substantial debts to Britain motivated this alignment. As the Red Army tightened its grip on urban centres, stopping the Bolsheviks outright rapidly became a costly prospect, but finding some way of prolonging the conflict on the Eastern Front, denying Germany the opportunity to concentrate its forces in the west, remained a priority, especially after the Ludendorff Offensive in March. This steered British policy in Siberia and southern Russia until intervention escalated in July and primary focus moved to the north.

In Russian Turkestan comparable but slightly different, separate aims emerged.[[4]](#footnote-4) Commercial gains did beckon, as noted by the Soviets’ narrative, but larger geopolitical concerns were also at work. Expansionist Turkish forces first appeared to threaten British India via Transcaspia, which also seemed to be teeming with German agents, and contained perhaps 35,000 German and Austrian Prisoners of War whose presence vexed the British Indian authorities as well as causing unease locally (Uyama 2019, p. 35). Fears of German *Weltpolitik* occupied British thinking. Berlin had been a natural ally to the beleaguered Ottoman Empire since the late nineteenth century, seeing pan-Islamist movements as a means of fostering dissent in British, Russian and French colonies. London came to see Persia as a potential buffer state in the context of Germany’s *Drang nach Osten*, the construction of the Berlin-Baghdad Railway, and the need to protect India, hence the division of Persia into Russian and British zones of influence in 1907. Britain was also concerned for its interests in Afghanistan. German agents had travelled to Kabul in 1916 to build an alliance with Habibullah Khan, Emir of Afghanistan. Transcaspia’s proximity to both Persia and Afghanistan naturally implicated the region, and so the nation-making potential of interstate power politics befell Transcaspia (Reynolds 2012, pp. 10, 26).[[5]](#footnote-5)In retrospect, it might be assumed that the British saw Transcaspiaas an ineluctable part of the Russian Empire or a future Bolshevik state, but they had little cause to do so in 1918. Russia’s imperial expansion had been quite late for a major European power. Transcaspia only came under Saint Petersburg’s control in the early 1880s following the Battle of Gökdepe. The British were very much cognisant of this. Russian tardiness was contrasted with Britain’s own, supposedly more established colonial relationship with the ‘Moslem world’, with which these regions were associated in London’s political geography.[[6]](#footnote-6) Transcaspia had long-standing connections with neighbouring Transcaucasia, where the British had a military presence for some time. Krasnovodsk (now Türkmenbaşy), on the eastern shore of the Caspian Sea, had originally been fortified to stymie British ambitions as well as to facilitate a particularly violent annexation (Khalid 1996, p. 272; Horák 2015, p. 151; Morrison 2013, p. 51). White Army presence in Transcaspia during the Civil War was considerable but nascent autonomous political projects generally expressed suspicion of the Whites and tended to focus on regional identities and interests. Support for Vladimir Lenin’s communist agenda was muted despite its anti-bourgeois and anti-imperial components. The whole area had been of major importance to the British Empire for some time; before Berlin became the main threat, it had been considered a vector by which Saint Petersburg threatened the security of British India as a move in the Great Game. This very point was made by Ellis in his retrospective lecture (1963, p. 107; Rothwell 1971, p. 292).

The sponsorship of a new state in Transcaspia thus made some strategic sense. Theoretically, such a state would be friendly to British commercial and military objectives, would act as a shield for British interests in India in the face of Turkish, German and (eventually) Bolshevik aggression, and would reject the siren call of Turkish and German propaganda at a time of renewed strength for the Central Powers following Russia’s withdrawal from the war.

The creation of the state might have had widespread ramifications. In the unstable context created by the Tsar’s abdication and the Bolsheviks’ seizure of power in Petrograd, the consequences of foreign intervention were highly uncertain. Politically speaking, in the Russian imperial periphery the gap between imagination and reality could be quite narrow. As Joshua Sanborn states, ‘the Romanov empire splintered into a mosaic of undergoverned statelets awash with violence and dominated by men in uniform’(2010, p. 196), though in Central Asia they were also led by men in civilian dress speaking non-Russian languages. Nationalists of all stripes had been emboldened by the radical proclamations of the Provisional Government, and some declared national autonomies, for example the *Alash* on the Kazakh Steppe. New self-appointed administrations might have been ephemeral and patchwork in their authority, but this was typical of the anarchic civil conflict that followed; the Bolsheviks’ own early grip on Central Asia looks robust only in comparison to those regimes they swept aside and would require years of solidification. Indeed, this was the nature of statecraft in various collapsing imperial borderlands at a time of profound geopolitical transformation. Britain operated in many such borderlands at this time granting support, sometimes solicited, sometimes not, for new autonomies. Any hesitation about dismembering a country which was very recently an ally in the Great War was soon overcome when relations with the Bolsheviks soured and new military exigencies became salient (Ullman 1961, p. 314).

This is not to say, though, that London was eager and confident of its ability to appropriate territory. The War Office (WO) and Foreign Office (FO) were clear and consistent in their fundamental aims: the isolation of India and Afghanistan from the contagion of Bolshevism, the prevention of Turkish and German expansion into Central Asia, and a halt to their propagandising against the British in the region.[[7]](#footnote-7) On a more opportunistic basis, London also expressed interest in expanding its shipping rights in the Caspian Sea. Extracting the 1918 cotton harvest from Turkestan before it spoiled had commercial and military advantages.[[8]](#footnote-8) If new friendly states could do these things, that was to be held open as an option depending on circumstance, and the UK was ready to act unilaterally to pursue its interests (Ullman 1968, p. 171). One report from British intelligence in March 1919 was produced ‘On the assumption of the importance to Great Britain and India of a friendly country north of Afghanistan, and the close connection between commerce and politics in dealing with Russia or Russian possessions…’ The report went on to state ‘It is understood that the possibilities will be capable of test as soon as Bolshevism is dispelled and order restored to Turkestan’, which is indicative of how quickly British objectives had to and did change.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Looking beyond their smaller or more reactionary immediate objectives, and beyond waiting and seeing, the British were ambivalent but not indifferent. In December 1918 the stated preference of the India Office (IO) and FO was a new Russian state led from Omsk; a Muslim-majority separatist state was expressly discouraged.[[10]](#footnote-10) Yet mixed signals were common, exacerbated by muddled thinking, strategic reticence and especially by differences between the Britain’s military establishment and political institutions.[[11]](#footnote-11) London was obviously not a single authority which spoke with one voice, but a conglomeration of institutions and individuals. It straightforwardly rejected efforts by one Turkestan-based authority to become an English protectorate in 1918, surely an unfeasible option given the location and political realities of Turkestan at the time, Turkestan being further east, deeper into Russian-controlled lands and further from British imperial reach, and gripped by more radical and anti-colonial political currents. But, tellingly, this ambitious ‘Turkestan Union’, which hoped to stretch from Vernyi (Almaty) to Orenburg to Krasnovodsk, did still receive financial aid from the British, and in other locations where proto-states seemed less of a lost cause, the British committed more than just funds.[[12]](#footnote-12) The Emir of Bukhara, the anti-Bolshevik leader of a quasi-autonomous principality of Russian Turkestan, received arms.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Local actors and agents daydreamed about far greater state-building and proxy schemes than the British government would expressly endorse. The prevalence of mission creep among British officers stationed in Central Asia during the Civil War is well documented, and is something London appears to have anticipated (Lemon 2015, p. 134). One officer originally posted on a reconnaissance mission became a key advocate for – and participant in – the development of a new regional state (Millman 2001, p. 214). Through experience on the ground, such agents would discover a new view of the region and its conflicts, arguing that London overstated German and Turkish influence or popularity, underestimated the Bolshevik threat, and (belatedly) could not rely on European Russians to maintain political stability.[[14]](#footnote-14) Numerous times British agents reported on local attitudes towards foreign powers. Intense interest was taken in the reputation of ‘England’ among both the Russian and Muslim populations across the whole region; London was repeatedly advised against ‘creating anti-British feeling among the Mohammedans’. The popularity of Germany and Turkey was also a preoccupation.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Ultimately, a defining characteristic of British imperialism at this time was overstretch. The quantity and diversity of Britain’s military, diplomatic and financial commitments in the years 1918 and 1919 are hard to exaggerate, and they would only grow. Crises erupted in Egypt, in Ireland, in India, and sufficient management of just one meant insufficient management of the others. So, Britain involved itself in the former colonies of collapsing empires while being acutely aware that, without strenuous effort, it might join the latter in disintegrating. The extent of Britain’s involvement with peoples like the Turkmen was a cause of this overstretch; that Britain eventually left the Turkmen marooned was this overstretch’s symptom (Gallagher, 1991).

These, then, are the circumstances which lead to Britain’s engagement with Turkmen elites in a region of the former Tsarist Empire. Britain had a range of interests in Turkmen lands, commercial and political as well as military, and a series of direct competitors to see off. British presence in India, Afghanistan and Persia made Transcaspia seem like a natural venue for intervention, both because of its geographical proximity to British-controlled lands and because of its cultural and linguistic ties to said lands; Turkmen tribes claimed ownership of territory not only in the Russian Empire, but in Persia and Afghanistan as well. Despite scepticism in London, British agents operating in the area argued for an escalating level of intervention, and London did not always demur. A substantive commitment of British troops was not possible given the United Kingdom’s broader engagement during World War One. But British agents and British forces were fulfilling a role left by Tsarism, not yet occupied by Bolshevism. Why did the British not sponsor the Turkmen, or engage with them earlier, and what were the consequences? For a full answer we need to begin with events further west.

*Transcaucasia*

The complicated Civil War history of Transcaucasia has as much to do with the Ottoman Empire as the British Empire. In December 1917, following the Russian Revolution, Turkish forces signed an armistice with the commander of Russian forces in the Caucasus. Authorities in Tiflis however refused to cede territory to the Turks as stipulated in the Brest-Litovsk Treaty and acknowledged a new state of war. The British responded to the subsequent Turkish encroachment with alarm, envisioning a surge of support for the Ottoman Empire’s invading Army of Islam among the population of Transcaucasia and Transcaspia. In January 1918 Major-General Lionel C. Dunsterville was appointed head of the British mission in the Caucasus and charged with the task of maintaining and defending a buffer zone between the Turkish forces and the Caspian Sea, though he did not reach the Caspian until early June.

By then the political geography had transformed and fragmented. The withdrawal of Russian troops, combined with the threat of Ottoman invasion, exacerbated ethnic tensions and undermined authorities in Tiflis who were cooperating with the Soviets and making efforts to govern the region independently. The multinational Transcaucasian Commissariat became increasingly embattled, leading to Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan all declaring their own national autonomies with very different attitudes towards external interference (Suny 1996, pp. 258-259). Yet Moscow forbade the Transcaucasian Commissariat from dealing with the British visitors, who were originally intended as a taskforce for training local soldiers (Ullman 1961, pp. 303-310).

This changed in July. As the Turks advanced, members of the Commissariat panicked and tried to vacate the area, ceding control of Baku to a new ‘Centro-Caspian Government’ (often referred to as the Centro-Caspian Dictatorship), composed of an anti-Bolshevik political coalition which the British understood primarily as Mensheviks or a Russian-Armenian administration, Dashnaks and Social Revolutionaries.[[16]](#footnote-16) They invited Dunsterville and his forces into Baku and requested their protection.

The British had many dealings with the government and offered it meaningful support, including regular funds. This was primarily because the Centro-Caspian Government resisted Turkish influence. During a short period of peace between the Ottomans and Centro-Caspian Government, the British considered discontinuing their supply of funds, though this suggestion was rejected on the basis that British interests might continue to be served best if British money attended them. So as to be discreet, this money was falsely presented as ‘Armenian relief work’, and in this manner made its way to the region. The British appear to have come under pressure from the United States to increase these funds in the first half of 1918. Armenians were described as an ongoing source of resistance to the Turks and worthy of protection; this was how London saw the ethnic conflict unfolding in the region.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Dunsterville sought to cooperate with General Bicherakhov, an anti-Bolshevik Cossack commander who had refused Petrograd’s earlier orders to withdraw from the area, though London discouraged close association with him. Dunsterville finally arrived in Baku with 1,500 soldiers on 17th August, much later than originally intended (Lemon 2015, pp. 134, 138). Already at this point, though, Baku was under siege by the much larger Army of Islam. In September 1918 all efforts to fend off the enemy proved a humiliating failure. The Centro-Caspian Government was evacuated amid brutal violence. Dunsterville retreated on 14th September having kept the Baku oilfields out of Turkish enemy hands for six weeks.

The Centro-Caspian Government does appear to have been in the minds of British officers when a joint Russian and British force recaptured Baku from the Turks in November 1918, however. The British oversaw a poorly maintained peace between the different ethnic groups left residing in the city and continued the battle against Bolshevik agitation. By March 1919 many of the Russian troops had left, but White forces remained in the area, negotiating awkwardly with Turkic tribes about the possibilities of ‘tribal self-government’ and local occupation of territory.[[18]](#footnote-18) The British left Baku in chaotic fashion in September 1919, handing power to the Azeris. Since Ottoman withdrawal, Baku had been under British control for all of ten months. A British telegram from Tiflis, dated 16th February 1920, described these ten months as ‘the story of the reconstruction of Baku… which gave the oil capital peace at a time when the remainder of Russia and Russia’s pre-war dominions were [struck by] strife and disorder.’[[19]](#footnote-19) Events in Baku provide strategic and political context for what happened further east.

*Transcaspia*

Like Baku, Ashgabat was run by a nominally Soviet administration in the first half of 1918, and was similarly faced with instability and economic chaos, as well as management of the vitally important Transcaspian Railway. This line provided the only meaningful access to the single port town on the Caspian Sea’s eastern shore, Krasnovodsk. London originally feared that, had the fate of Baku been different, the line could be used as a thoroughfare to help invading Turkish forces make their way from Azerbaijan to northern India and beyond. Major-General Wilfrid Malleson was the Indian Army intelligence officer who commanded the British mission in Russian Turkestan, including in Transcaspia. His military career in 1915 and 1916 in East Africa had been spotted with failures (Morris 1977, p. 364). From June 1918 he was based in Meshed (Mashhad in contemporary Iran), under orders to sabotage the Transcaspian Railway if Turkish forces got near enough to use it (Ullman 1961, p. 311). By his own account, Malleson began his task with substantial funds but no forces to speak of, though some Indian cavalry and infantry stationed along the Afghan-Persian border to intercept German agents were able to provide assistance (1933, pp. 337, 340). In time, the Malleson Mission became a complex military and intelligence campaign working along protracted and challenging lines of communication spread over huge distances. It ended when British forces withdrew in April 1919, though important connections were preserved between British agents and Central Asian rebels still resistant to the Bolsheviks into the 1920s.

The balance of powers in Transcaspia shifted in June 1918 when a Commissar Frolov from the Tashkent Soviet arrived to support the Ashgabat administration, suppress revolt and enforce the Bolsheviks’ line. The first Commissars of Tashkent were notorious for their insensitivity and provocation, particularly as regards the non-Russian populations under their management. This was despite being cut off from Bolshevik leadership in Moscow by a zone to the north of Turkestan controlled by the Whites (Sahadeo 2007, pp. 187-207). After exacerbating local tensions with heavy-handed actions in Ashgabat, the Tashkent Commissar toured Transcaspia only to be murdered along with his bodyguards by unhappy railway men in Kizyl Arvat (now Serdar).

This led immediately to a broader challenge to the leadership of the Bolsheviks in Transcaspia. Around 12th July the Ashgabat Soviet was replaced by a committee of labourers and railway workers. This committee was eventually renamed the Transcaspian Provisional Government on 5th November. It adopted a roughhewn bicameral structure and a cabinet of ministers (Teague-Jones 1990, pp. 113-114). Those managing and working on the railway thus became the most powerful members of the district in the absence of Tsarist or Soviet authority; they also represented the vast majority of the European (mainly Russian) population of the area. Their committee quickly cut telegraph lines and tried to purge the local area of Bolshevik agents.

The degree to which this committee was from its inception also composed of Turkmen is contested in the scholarship. Some British accounts, such as those of Malleson himself, mention hardly any Turkmen at all. Equally though, Soviet historians overstate the degree of White Army involvement; the majority of the committee’s members are better described as Social Revolutionaries. Ellis lists some Turkmen tribal leaders who cooperated with them. Hadj Murat was the sole Turkmen representative on the body itself.Oraz Serdar commanded the committee’s armed forces. Seid Murad Ovezbaev took on an advisory role. All of these three men had occupied senior positions in the Tsar’s army before the revolution and aspired to create an autonomous Turkmen state or series of khanates (Malleson 1933, p 339; Clement 2018 p. 38; Ellis 1963, pp. 28, 130). The committee made fitful efforts to work together for political legitimacy with its counterparts on the other side of the Caspian Sea, appealing for military support from General Bicherakhovin the knowledge that a reprisal from Tashkent would be forthcoming immediately. Common cause was made with some Turkmen on a military basis; the committee’s own army consisted mainly of Russians, Armenians and Turkmen cavalry. In early August they also solicited support from Malleson in Meshed.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Following this diplomatic appeal, the FO formally pledged support for the creation of a new Transcaspian authority. This support was formalised in an agreement sent to the WO by General Malleson, who was given significant autonomy in his dealing with Ashgabat by London and naturally became a key voice in the British discussion about policy in Transcaspia. An important obligation on the Transcaspian Provisional Government, detailed in the agreement, was to struggle against Turkish and German subterfuge. The British, for their part, were asked to defend Baku and Krasnovodsk, supply the Transcaspian Provisional Government with arms, funds and resources, and to help raise a local militia. The agreement granted the British shipping availability in the Caspian Sea and control over local railways, but any cotton exports outside the notional jurisdiction of the Transcaspian Provisional Government were prohibited.[[21]](#footnote-21)

The same month that the agreement was signed, Ashgabat received a contingent of British troops from the IO, to help them resist the Bolshevik encroachment.[[22]](#footnote-22) They shortly engaged with Red Army forces invading from the east, and successfully held them at bay despite sustaining major losses. Malleson also endorsed the request from local Russians that the British occupy Krasnovodsk militarily. British reinforcements included Indian cavalry (*sowars*) from the 28th Lancers regiment and soldiers from the 19th Punjabi regiment, carrying machine guns which ‘did great execution’.[[23]](#footnote-23) They were supplemented the next month by forces from the 28th Indian Cavalry. Malleson ordered his small force to apply further pressure on pro-Bolshevik holdouts, occupying the towns of Dushak and Tejend. On 31st August 1918 the Cheka secret police force raided the British embassy in Petrograd, pushing Anglo-Soviet relations fully out of the diplomatic arena and into open warfare (Jeffrey 2010, p. 138).

The WO understood Malleson’s actions as keeping in existence a ‘Transcaspian State’. This state was frustrating Bolshevik efforts in the area and permitting use of Caspian shipping routes and the railway line.[[24]](#footnote-24) The military benefits of this became clear when the routes were used to facilitate the recapture of Baku described above.[[25]](#footnote-25) The Transcaspian authorities were dysfunctional and unpopular, struggling with unrest and shortages, but they seemed to Malleson and the IO to be the last best defence for British India, at least for the time being; Malleson himself saw British involvement in the area as a temporary action. The Red Army, led from Tashkent, maintained pressure on the new regime, engaging in a ‘railway war’ involving the daily meeting and parting of armoured trains topped with Howitzers and machine guns (Ullman 1961, pp. 319-325; Ter Minassian 2014 p. 85). Though reinforcements and funds from the British Empire sustained order in Transcaspia, promised military aid from the Centro-Caspian Government never materialised.

In September 1918 Transcaucasian affairs did intervene, to the Transcaspians’ detriment, with the infamous execution of the twenty-six Baku Commissars. The Ashgabat Soviet became gaoler for twenty-six members of the old Baku Commissariat which had been discontinued and arrested at the same time that the Centro-Caspian Government was established earlier in 1918. Ashgabat resolved to execute them, despite British warnings that this would intensify hostility from Bolshevik forces. Soviet historiography later blamed the executions on the British themselves. So much of the British memoir sources on the Malleson Mission try explicitly to evade this blame. Other historians have supported this effort, exculpating British authorities by pointing to advice from British agents that the commissars be sent to India as hostages (Ter Minassian 2014 p. 105-172; Ullman 1961, pp. 320-324). Again though the effect of responding to the Soviet narrative is to deemphasise British influence and aspirations in the region. In any case, the executions further lowered British opinion of the Ashgabat authorities, who were proving themselves disorganised and clumsy.

As such, the broader context of the Civil War had its effect and, as the Reds pushed southwards, Ashgabat’s hopes for independent statehood diminished to nothing. By December 1918 the Transcaspian Provisional Government had lost all likely prospect of controlling the province. It had alienated the local population by seeking to conscript all men aged 21-25, and failed to control a regiment of Dagestani soldiers it had barracked in Ashgabat. Fearing imminent defeat by Bolshevik forces and acknowledging a critical lack of funds, it dissolved itself. London was aware of the rapidly deteriorating situation in Transcaspia, including riots in Krasnovodsk which were blamed on Bolshevik agitation.[[26]](#footnote-26) In the same month a Committee of Public Safety was established to replace the Transcaspian Provisional Government. This new institution vested British agents with much personal power. It quickly set about arresting Bolshevik agitators, addressing the non-payment of wages (a key source of tension among the population) and considered turning a local press outlet into a propaganda tool for the British state.[[27]](#footnote-27) It thereby preserved British control of Krasnovodsk and nearby regions for some time, with the help of further reinforcements from India in January, but not indefinitely. By March 1919 the British military presence in Transcaspia had been reduced back to a small garrison in Krasnovodsk. The British had fully withdrawn by April; this is one of the moments which might be described as the end of the Transcaspian Episode.[[28]](#footnote-28) The Reds were expected to prioritise the capture of Krasnovodsk later that year, not least because it contained vital supplies for the maintenance of the all-important railroads, though in practice conquest of the city would take a little longer.[[29]](#footnote-29)

*‘Turcomans Ready to Rise’*

Why did Britain’s role in Transcaspia, mediated by local politics, steadily decrease instead of steadily strengthening? Why did Transcaspia’s autonomy disintegrate? Forces engaged in Afghanistan were in need of support and in general the war in Europe meant resources were overstretched. Over time, the perceived threat to India diminished. By the end of 1918 the Great War was over, German and Austrian POWs had left the area and a Turkish invasion was no longer possible (Ullman 1961, p. 328). Ashgabat’s strategic interests differed from those of other anti-Bolshevik forces like Bicherakhov’s, who sought to push outwards and hold the Caspian rather than consolidating elsewhere, meaning less support and cooperation between them (Reynolds 2012 pp. 226, 229). The eventual success of the Red Army became more foreseeable as months passed, accounting for a ratcheting down of commitment. But other local factors were at play. Buried within this story of the ephemeral Transcaspian Provisional Government is the late change in Britain’s preferred governing group for the region.

Back in August 1918, having sampled the opinion in Turkestan and Transcaspia, Malleson shared the predominant Russian view that arming Turkmen tribes not fully participating in the government would be a very bad idea. He noted that the Transcaspian Government left the Turkmen to engage militarily with the Red Army not because of their military prowess, which seemed questionable, but because it kept them occupied; they were more trouble for local Russian civilians when they were demobilised. The Yomut tribe of Turkmen were reserved particular ire, as uncooperative and abrasive allies.[[30]](#footnote-30) The picture which emerges from correspondence of this time is composed of traditional colonial stereotypes: occasionally brave but always guileless tribal peoples without the strategy or technology needed to compete properly with Europeans. As they were described as ‘Republican in sympathies’, unenamoured of the old tsarist status quo, they sat awkwardly alongside some other parts of the anti-Bolshevik coalition.[[31]](#footnote-31) The natural result of this was Britain’s initial, aforementioned support for a new Russian state with its government in Omsk; the local European colonial population seemed a safer and more reliable buffer, and the new administration which they dominated was at that early point untested.

Yet opinion would change. Just as London came slowly to appreciate the full appeal of Bolshevism to working Russians across the old empire, the Turkmen’s cautious willingness to work with the British, and their deep animosity towards the Red Army, became more salient.[[32]](#footnote-32) The British seemed consistently surprised by the receptivity of European railway workers and labourers to the ideology of communism, and frustrated by the Whites’ repeated alienation of non-Russians who would otherwise make workable allies. Nevertheless the Turkmen and other non-Russians proved reliably anti-Bolshevik, upset as they were by, for example, the notorious actions of the Tashkent Soviet before it was forced to soften its pro-Russian stance (Edgar 2004, p. 35). Pan-Turkism and pan-Islamism did not grip the Turkmen as might have been feared; it seemed to encourage interest in a Turkmen state rather than Turkmen membership of a much larger polity.[[33]](#footnote-33) A Turkmen committee began operating outside of Ashgabat in September as a counterweight to the Russian-dominated Transcaspian Government, and agents like Captain Reginald Teague-Jones used such institutions as a vector for regular if often strained communication with various tribal authorities (Ter Minassian 2014, pp. 81, 97). In his retrospective lecture delivered in 1940, Colonel J. K. Tod, another member of the Malleson mission, describes the growing respect of British officers for Oraz Serdar, proponent of the Turkestan Union and the son of a Teke Turkmen military leader who had fought at Gökdepe (Tod 1940, p. 53; Peyrouse 2011, p. 31). The Turkmen themselves gradually overcame their distrust of the British within the same timeframe (Teague-Jones 1990, p. 139).

A turning point appears to have come in early November 1918, when the WO had a serious disagreement with the Transcaspian Government over Bicherakhov’s intention to return to the Krasnovodsk area. There are signs that the Cossacks were becoming nervous about London’s long-term intentions for the port city, and its effect on local commercial revenues, but the British retorted that Bicherakhov’s presence would aggravate ethnic relations there. Russians in and around Krasnovodsk had called on Bicherakhov to return to protect them from the Turkmen, and he was known to favour the reestablishment of Russian dominance in the region (Morris 1977, pp. 368-369).The Turkmen would thus surely find his arrival deeply provocative and prepare for armed confrontation.[[34]](#footnote-34) Where the army was not present, Russians were already taking matters into their own hands by fighting the Turkmen.[[35]](#footnote-35)

The British expressed concern for ethnic sensitivities in Transcaspia not simply as a pretext to keep Bicherakhov at bay, and the failure of cooperation between forces on either side of the Caspian Sea was not only about resources and military strategy. Contrasting it with Bicherakhov’s hostile relationship with the Turkmen, L. P. Morris summarised Malleson’s evolving view as follows: ‘It is difficult to avoid concluding that Malleson favoured some form of separate, Muslim, Central Asian political unit under British influence and enjoying British assistance and support’ (1977, p. 369). For the Malleson of November 1918 this feels like an overstatement, but calculations among the agents of Malmiss at this time did deviate from Bicherakhov’s on this matter and meaningfully so.

By December 1918, at the same time that he was involved in directing the Committee of Public Safety, Malleson had begun speaking of the Turkmen of Transcaspia as seeking further cooperation with the British and preferring stability for their region (this does exclude the Yomuts who were ‘giving trouble’ and having to be suppressed militarily, though even this would change eventually).[[36]](#footnote-36) Ashgabat’s inability to control local tribespeople did signify the Transcaspian Provisional Government’s lack of power, but it also came to signify the location of real power in the region. The Turkmen cavalry’s much reported tendency to come and go ‘as they thought fit’, and to retreat when battle intensified, seems as much a product of differing strategic aims as a general disorderliness (Ellis 1963, pp. 49, 52-53). The Ashgabat authorities themselves were aware of Turkmen hopes to once again dominate the region for the first time since the 1880s. According to Colonel Tod, Malleson himself insisted that two Turkmen sit on the Committee of Public Safety (Tod 1940, p. 61).[[37]](#footnote-37) The selection of these two Turkmen, the aforementioned Sied Murad Ovezbaev and Hadj Murat, became a matter of huge importance and heated debate within the local Turkmen population (Teague-Jones 1990, pp. 183-184).In January 1919 the British Government decided to withdraw Malleson’s forces from Transcaspia (Ullman 1961, pp. 171-172). In the same month and in the context of British withdrawal, Teague-Jones reported on the politics of Ashgabat, where Malmiss was temporarily stationed. After the dissolution of the Transcaspian Government, local Turkmen tribal authority co-existed uneasily with Russian municipal structures until the Bolsheviks captured the area, and Teague-Jones took the Turkmen politics of the city seriously.[[38]](#footnote-38) He identified two groups with distinct positions: one, to avoid all involvement in Russian affairs, two, more assertive, to fend off encroaching Russians and establish a new Turkmen state. The report acknowledged that tribal Turkmen were somewhat disconnected from the affairs of the city and if anything preferred the more conservative option of non-involvement, but added that the Turkmen thought of themselves as the principal power in Transcaspia and that popular support for a new Turkmen Khanate had been intensified by the recent Ottoman presence. Non-involvement was hardly an option as the Turkmen would have to actively resist conscription into the Red Army and confiscation of foodstuffs. Teague-Jones further emphasised the debt of gratitude felt by Turkmen to the British, for the military contribution which had thus far been made.[[39]](#footnote-39)

In his memoir, Teague-Jones wrote about another scheme for statehood presented to him by Ovezbaev, the Turcophile Teke Turkmen involved in Transcaspian politics. This plan for an independent Turkmenistan would have different internal zones of influence for different tribal elites within its borders. Its author, who had marked out a large zone of influence for himself, hoped for British recognition to make such a Turkmenistan a reality, inspired by recent British actions he had observed in Transcaucasia. Teague-Jones reported on the incredulity he felt when examining the plan at such a late stage of Britain’s involvement in Transcaspia, though he apparently maintained good relations with Ovezbaev himself (Teague-Jones 1990, pp. 186-187; Ter Minassian 2014, p. 98).

Without doubting Teague-Jones’ incredulity, retrospection is a potent force. Such a Turkmen Khanate would not have been *ex nihilo*. It would have exhibited the usual mix of old and new. The dream of Turkmen pan-tribal unity had been a consistent feature of Turkmen discourse, mixed in with religious and, increasingly, linguistic components of Turkmen identity. Turkmen in the nineteenth century made efforts to ‘federate their peoples and to increase their political weight’ (Hallez and Ohayon 2019, p. 259). Exposure to and interaction with Jadidism in the early twentieth century then lead to a small but extant interest in modernisation and reform among the Turkmen, notably explored in a Turkmen-Persian language newspaper published in Ashgabat from 1914 to 1917. In December 1917 an all-Turkmen Congress had sent delegates to the Fourth Extraordinary Muslim Congress in Kokand, another organisation which briefly declared an autonomous government, this time in Turkestan. In February 1918 efforts had been made to create an all-Turkmen army, something the Bolsheviks had strenuously and successfully discouraged (Clement 2018, pp. 17-35; Edgar 2004, pp. 7-8, 32-25). Hadj Murat had even established a Turkmen Central Executive Committee in Bezmein (today’s Abadan) before joining the Transcaspian Government and coming ‘to realise that more could be gained by waiting than by precipitating matters’, and eventually that ‘the British were the deciding factor’ (Teague-Jones 1990, pp. 140, 188).

As such, while the plan presented to Teague-Jones seemed fanciful for its timing, its content was very noteworthy. No plan for Turkmen nationhood failed to advantage one tribe over the rest, none were likely to, but the notion of bringing all tribes together had a lineage which had been formalised and mapped out for the benefit of British consumption, here and in other such incidents. The Turkmen were not alone in prizing and soliciting such support from foreign powers, of course. Woodrow Wilson’s mandate for Armenia, rejected by the US Senate in 1920, is another such example.

Turkmen statehood was not invented by the British, but its ideation was affected and possibly expedited by British intervention. Tellingly, in trying to enlist support for Transcaspia from the Emir of Bukhara, Oraz Serdar circumnavigated the Ashgabat committee and arranged a direct, bilateral meeting between Malleson and a Bukharan diplomat. The meeting ended with the British pledging some military supplies to Bukhara but nothing more concrete (Ellis 1963, pp. 140-143). By being in the room, in this case literally, in others figuratively, the British both gave the Turkmen confidence to seek statehood but also caused them to see it as contingent upon British support. Machinations with the printing of money and the creation of new institutions, indeed most of the acts performed by the British since mid-1918, created hope in Transcaspia that the British were fully committed to the region. Senior Turkmen, both conservative and nationalist, saw their relationship with the British as critical. The later Soviet narrative described the process as follows: ‘Having ensured the insolvency of the Socialist Revolutionary Transcaspian Provisional Government, Malleson replaced it with educated members of the Turkestan nationalists “for public safety” … but in fact a military dictatorship of English interventionists had been established’ (Khromov et al 1983, p. 35. See also Eleuov 1963, pp. 364-370). Inaccuracy abounds in this sentence but its depiction of the relationship between British and Turkmen agents contains an element of truth.

British intervention also interacted with the political geography of the Turkmen peoples. In the late Russian Empire’s administrative topography, Transcaspia was isolated, cut off from other parts of Turkestan by the vassal khanates of Bukhara and Khiva. Turkmen could be found in each of these three regions, however: the Khivan Turkmen, Bukharan Turkmen, and Transcaspian Turkmen. Then there were Turkmen outside of the Tsar’s jurisdiction, whether on the Russian-Persian border or in Eastern Anatolia (Nepesov 1950, p. 3; Hartmann 2013, pp. 177-178).) These geographical distinctions did not map onto Turkmen tribal loyalties, but they affected Turkmen experience in a variety of ways, not least during the Civil War. While British influence contributed to the ideation of statehood among Transcaspian Turkmen around Ashgabat, Khivan Turkmen witnessed the uprising of Yomut leader Junaid Khan and a different kind of autonomy, for example (Edgar 2004, pp.38, 66; Nepesov 1950). Junaid Khan is said to have declared that the Turkmen would better befriend the British than the Russians, since the former were further away and might afford more freedom, but representations of him as a nationalist facilitated by foreign agents are inaccurate and have problematic historiographical origins (Kadyrov 2013 p. 217; Abdurasulov 2018).By February 1919, the language in British communiques had become more urgent, and L. P. Morris’ summary of Malleson’s views is more accurate. One message between the British command in Constantinople and the WO summarised Malleson’s opinion as: ‘…to refuse to help [the Turkmen] will lead to anarchy and disaster.’[[40]](#footnote-40) There followed between London and its agents a serious discussion of whether or not the British presence should be increased in Transcaspia, to the benefit of the Turkmen, at a forbidding point in the Russian Civil War. The political direction of Tashkent and wider Turkestan, by then likely to remain Soviet, was a key factor; if there would be no British-friendly state further east, then where? London was consistent in its refusal to commit significant numbers of British soldiers.[[41]](#footnote-41) But a new Turkmen organisation, armed and funded by the British, emerged as a final possibility. Malleson had overcome the obstinance attributed to him by Ellis to make this point (Ter Minassian 2014, p. 101). To amplify it, Malleson contended that the Russians in Transcaspia were not trustworthy and were prone to Bolshevism, quite a decline in status for a formerly friendly population.[[42]](#footnote-42)

In late May 1919 the Tashkent Soviet was on manoeuvres to recapture Transcaspia, and White Army generals had taken primary control of defending the region. They were coming to similar conclusions to those of the British. They sought to organise the Turkmen troops in the Transcaspian area, partly having recognised the parlous state of the Russian troops still available, though officers lower down the chain of command were apparently reluctant to distribute arms among non-Europeans.[[43]](#footnote-43)

In July 1919 the Red Army was ready to capture Ashgabat, and the British again took a deputation from the Turkmen governing in the city.[[44]](#footnote-44) Like others before them, these Turkmen claimed to speak for all Turkmen, who they claimed represented ‘96 per cent. of whole population between the Caspian and Oxus.’ The Transcaspian Episode was not quite over for them. They expressed a desire for self-determination, enquiring whether a ‘Peace Conference’ could declare all Turkmen from the Caspian Sea to the Oxus River a ‘Turcoman nation’, with British sponsorship giving the idea a legitimacy which external powers would respect. True, the Turkmen now eventually intended for their nation to join a new federation of post-Tsarist states after the Civil War, but this appears to have been on the assumption that a liberal order would take hold in the north. The deputation emphasised to the British that the non-Russian cohorts of the Red Army in Transcaspia bore no enmity towards the British, and the arrival of British troops along the Persian border would be enough to intimidate the Bolsheviks into allowing an autonomous new state to be established without a fight. Thus the geographical particularity of this new state project was again affected by Britain’s own strategic reach, something states imagined deeper in Central Asia could not so readily rely upon. The benevolent attitude of the British Empire towards Islam was juxtaposed with the rising tide of Lenin’s militant atheism.

The agent with whom the deputation spoke demurred, explaining that while Britain was engaged militarily in Afghanistan no additional resources could be spared. The recapture of Baku by British forces, precluding imminent threat of invasion from the east, had also lowered the stakes for the British in Transcaspia (Ellis 1959, p. 116). The agent noted, though, that in their private opinion the Turkmen were right that the presence of British soldiers would be enough to dissuade the Bolsheviks from forcibly suppressing Turkmen statehood ‘provided that Orenburg front is not opened’.[[45]](#footnote-45) Word came from London that a British protectorate for the Turkmen remained impossible but that the Turkmen should be encouraged to engage in guerrilla resistance to the Bolsheviks. The Turkmen requested direct British leadership in this resistance campaign but were again turned down as this was deemed ‘impracticable’.[[46]](#footnote-46) Ashgabat was captured in July 1919. Slender hopes refused to die, though. Still in September Malleson was travelling in the region with instructions to frustrate the Red Army’s advance. He argued that an autonomous Transcaspian state would both unite the region against the Bolsheviks and ‘take wind out of sails of pan-Islamic agitators’. Local forces continued to request British assistance.[[47]](#footnote-47) Krasnovodsk was kept out of Red Army hands until February 1920.

Too late the British had come to favour the Turkmen as a proxy. It is indicative that, almost a year after the British presence had been so dramatically reduced, a secret naval staff report to London noted that the likelihood of White survival in the Caspian region was very low. The report, dated December 1919, concluded with the following advice when responding to what fragile nationalist, anti-Bolshevik statehood still existed in the region: ‘Recognise the Caucasian Republics fully [*sic*] and create a buffer state, thus ensuring the safety of our line of communication to Persia via Batoum and Baku.’[[48]](#footnote-48) The history unfolded differently. Though the Bolsheviks’ grip on Transcaspia after the fall of Ashgabat was thought to be ‘precarious’ due to famines and shortage, with the ‘Turcomans ready to rise’, the predominance of opinion continued to hold that British support for a Turkmen state was impractical.[[49]](#footnote-49) The fall of Krasnovodsk then solidified this belief.

*After the Civil War*

Had something so ambitious as a Turkmen state been attempted then the British would of course have run into the same problem encountered, instead, by the Soviet state. Documentation from British agents demonstrates some sensitivity for the important differences between the various tribes thought to constitute the Turkmen peoples, but not much. The Communists would spend much of the Soviet era trying to achieve ‘tribal parity’ between rancorous groups embedded within the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic. A more modest British protectorate centred around Ashgabat would principally have included the Teke Turkmen and would have been more homogenous, but anything larger would have seen comparably significant cleavages in the governed population as that created by Joseph Stalin’s mapmakers, while other candidates for Turkmen citizenship would have been caught well beyond its borders (Edgar 2004, pp. 67, 182-184).

As for the Turkmen’s fate in the early USSR, it seems pertinent that some other national intelligentsias in Central Asia and the Caucasus developed and then decreed their own republics or states after the declaration of the Provisional Government. The Kazakhs announced the aforementioned *Alash* (sometimes called *Alash Orda*) on the steppe, the Young Khivans and Young Bukharans debated over a complicated mix of nationalism and modernisation to the south in Turkestan, and of course Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia all sought recognition for their national sovereignty. These early efforts at state-building were eventually co-opted and then modified by the Communist Party. Self-appointed national leaders were brought into the Soviet administration and given the chance to contribute to the national delimitation (Smith 1999), though many would be purged later in the Stalin era. Ovezbaev and Hadj Murat suffered this fate (Martin 2001, pp. 422-429). But among all the Central Asian state-building projects in the Civil War years, British intervention had most profoundly affected the Turkmen.. There was therefore a different kind of state-building for the Communists to co-opt: more contingent upon outside sponsorship, more geographically centred around the British presence in Ashgabat, carried by leaders who had not only consorted with foreign agents but fought alongside foreign soldiers. The Turkmen later saw the Transcaspian *Oblastˊ* (province)of the Turkestan Republic become the Turkmen *Oblastˊ*, joining other majority-Turkmen areas in the fluid territorial landscape of early Soviet Central Asia. They were granted a titular republic in 1924, with Ashgabat chosen as capital in an afterthought (Edgar 2004, pp. 35, 37-39, 68-69).[[50]](#footnote-50)

In initially placing their trust with the railway workers of Krasnovodsk and Ashgabat, the British expended time and resources building a bulwark against Bolshevism with a group which had little alternative to Lenin’s appeal. In then belatedly making themselves appear available for the sponsorship of a Turkmen state, whatever their true intentions at that late stage, the British invited requests for support from the Yomuts and Tekes. In requesting that support, various Turkmen expended time seeking to maximise tribal or personal interest or proffering plans for statehood that might peak London’s interest. This was one contributing factor, among many, to the decentring of Turkmen nationhood in the first iterations of the Soviet state. Given the importance of elites to the Soviet nationalities policy, and the effect on Turkmen elites of the Transcaspian Episode, it is logical to assert that the British affected the emergence of the Turkmen national republic. According to Artin H. Arslanian, the Transcaucasian nationalities came to view British war time policy as ‘extravagant war-time promises masking a policy of duplicity, exploitation, betrayal and condescension’ (Arslanian 1996, p. 295). This feels too strong for the Transcaspian case, but the same dynamic of over commitment and under delivery was at work.

All these events provide an opportunity here to compare the British and Soviet attitudes towards nation-making, and the discourses of the two powers as regards non-European, non-national peoples. In a sense, the Turkmen interacting with the British were caught in a geostrategic trap. When the Army of Islam was seen as a threat to British India, the British were loath to cooperate with the Turkmen partly because of their potential loyalty to a new Turkic or Islamic polity. Yet when this possibility receded the UK’s interest in sponsoring a Turkmen state was reduced because there was less need to defend India. In contrast, it was precisely the Bolsheviks’ fears of new pan-Islamic or pan-Turkic identities which contributed to their decision to foster national identities within a Soviet framework, an agenda that Stalin would famously come to describe as ‘national in form, socialist in content’. This was intended to ingratiate communist power with the Turkmen. It meant the elevation of Turkmen to positions of authority within their own republic, and the codification and use of a Turkmen national language. As Moscow’s fears of revolt or secession in Central Asia eased, national structures remained, hardened, and became vectors for socialist development. This was at odds with Lenin’s predictions but in keeping with Stalin’s agenda (Kassymbekova 2016, pp. 5-6).

The British instinct in Transcaspia was not to entrust the development of a state to Turkmen tribes. Agents of the British Empire like Malleson seemed to understand tribal and ethnic difference moderately better than they did early twentieth century political radicalism, but London came to appreciate this too late. In any case the British feared the example such a Turkmen state might set to minorities within their own colonies. Despite the Russian would-be leaders of Transcaspia seeming a ‘queer lot’, London favoured the Europeans to non-Europeans, labourers to tribal chieftains, and thereby delayed its identification of an alternative proxy force or state in the Transcaspian region until the Bolsheviks’ upper hand in the Civil War made fuller or more comprehensive intervention untenable (Tod 1940, pp. 45-67). It must of course be added that the Stalinist state’s treatment of non-Russian minorities was replete with cultural and ethnic prejudices of its own, but Transcaspia between 1918 and 1924 exemplifies the significant practical differences between British and Soviet proclivities at a time when no fewer than three enormous land empires were disintegrating and Britain was a global superpower. The USSR of course emphatically hoped that its new Central Asian republics *would* set an example to non-European colonised peoples in the remaining European Empires, not least the British Empire itself. The question of whether or not early Bolshevik power was a kind of imperial power implicates far more than solely the Transcaspian Episode, but here at least Soviet and British trajectories diverged.

London watched the Soviet-Turkmen relationship develop with interest. They were still supporting and cooperating, willingly and directly, with the Turkmen, including the Yomuts, well into 1919 and beyond.[[51]](#footnote-51) Already in March 1919, a report on the commercial status of Turkestan hoped: ‘To do a good turn to our very staunch friends and late supporters the “Turkoman”, and to turn to account their good will towards us, thereby raising a bulwark against any future tendencies towards “Pan-Turanianism” or “Pan-Islamism” of an anti-British nature.’[[52]](#footnote-52) In the absence of full autonomy, Malleson argued for the provision of aid and finances to the starving Turkmen, and the arming of Turkmen refuges, who might then form a mounted force 2,000 strong: ‘Such troops would be useful for raids on Bolshevik lines of communication, and some employment would circulate money amongst Turkoman and bind them to our side.’[[53]](#footnote-53) Suspicion was held for Kazim Bey, an Ottoman agent active in Ashgabat and held responsible for roiling anti-British sentiment (Khalid 2011, p. 468). [[54]](#footnote-54) The Soviet state was a new enemy.

This was part of Britain’s clandestine support for rebellious groups who operated in Central Asia until the early 1930s. This relationship is complicated by multiple factors, not least the complexity of the rebellious groups themselves. Described by the Communist Party as *Basmachestvo* or the Basmachi, drawing from the Turkic word for banditry, this label exaggerates the unity of the groups and their purpose. Though they hindered Soviet state-building, they were not hostile only to Soviet power, nor even the local Russian population, but often engaged in struggle between themselves or with urban Central Asians. They operated for the longest time and in the most effective manner in eastern Turkestan and the Ferghana Valley, but drew also from the Turkmen who had collaborated with the Transcaspian Provisional Government; rebels in Transcaspia were not brought under control by the Bolsheviks until around 1924 (Pipes 1964, p. 181; Edgar 2004, p. 39). By later resorting to cooperation with the Basmachi, Britain’s indirect role in Central Asian affairs did frustrate the Soviet state, but it never truly challenged it in the way it might have in 1918-1919.

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1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. National Archives (hereafter NA) WO 106.61.31, pp. 10-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Malmiss was the UK’s intelligence mission for Transcaspia during World War One and the Russian Civil War, led by Major-General Wilfrid Malleson from Meshed, though it would twice temporarily relocate to Ashgabat (Ellis 1959, pp. 106-118). Ellis also published a very readable book by the same name four years later. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Roughly, Russian Turkestan was that region now occupied by the nations of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. As indicated by Edward J. Lemon, when reviewing the behaviour of British agents, the feasibility of German or Turkish aspirations in this region is less important than the extent to which Britain expected these aspirations to be acted upon (2015, p. 137). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. NA CAB 21.177 p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. NA WO 106.60.5, pp. 1, 5; NA WO 106.1560, pp. 45, 88-89, 96; NA CAB 21.177, p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Cotton, Central Asia’s ‘White Gold’, could be used in munitions and military equipment. NA WO 106.1560, pp. 63, 96, 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. NA WO 106.61.5, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. NA FO 92517120, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. NA WO 106.1560 p. 3. For a broader discussion of Britain’s strategic understanding of Russian geography and policy making, see Ullman (1961, pp. 83, 82-167). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. NA WO 106.60.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. NA FO 608.179, p. 289 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. NA WO 106.60.3, pp. 1-6, 7-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. NA WO 106.1560 p. 96; NA WO 106.60.3, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. When the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party split in 1903, it created two factions, the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. While the Mensheviks were indeed a meaningful political force in 1917, the British often used the word as a catch-all term for political radicals who resisted or stood apart from Lenin’s Party in the Civil War years, which was reductive. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. NA WO 106.1560, pp. 4, 45, 88-89, 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. NA WO 106.1561, p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. NA WO 106.1562, p. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. NA WO 106.61.7, pp. 2-5; Ullman (1961, p. 315); Eleuov et al 1963, pp. 345-246). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. NA WO 106.61.12, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. NA WO 106.61.7, pp. 2-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. NA WO 106.60.2, p. 6; Malleson, (1933, p. 340). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. NA WO 106.60.1, p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. NA WO 106.61.17. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. NA WO 106.61.7, pp. 2-5; NA WO 106.60.1 p. 2; C. H. Ellis (1963, pp. 128-129). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. NA WO 106.60.1 pp. 3-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. NA WO 106.1561, pp. 21-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. British Library (hereafter BL) IOR.L.PS.10.836, p. 6. Note that the full title of this file is: ‘File 2995/1919 Pt 1 Bolshevik activities in Central Asia, Afghanistan and Persia’ and ranges 1918-1920. The full title of IOR/L/PS/10/837, another British Library collection used in the preparation of this articles, is: ‘File 2995/1919 Pt 3 Bolshevik activities in Central Asia, Afghanistan and Persia; anti-Russian movement’ and ranges 1922-1924. This would imply the existence of a ‘Pt 2’ which extends the material from 1920-1922, but no such files exists, and given the history of the materials it is fair to speculate that the files were in some way lost or damaged between their creation and the 1960s, when the collection was reorganised. The author would like to thank staff at the British Library for their help on this matter. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. NA WO 106.60.2 pp. 1, 10; NA WO 106.60.5 p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. NA WO 106.60.2 p. 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. NA WO 106.60.2 p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Notably, the Turkish identity advocated by the Young Turks in Eastern Anatolia was not an easy fit for their own indigenous Turkmen (Hartmann 2013, pp. 177-178). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. NA WO 106.60.1 pp. 25-30 [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. NA WO 106.60.1 p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. NA WO 106.60.1 pp. 7, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Soviet documentation published later puts this specification the other way around, suggesting that the Transcaspians declared that a ‘majority of the members of the Committee for Public Safety should be Russian’ (Eleuov et al 1963, p. 357). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Khan Yomutski asserted that the Ashgabat government in May 1919 was composed of six Russians and one Turkmen, and that he had no confidence in its capabilities: NA WO 106.61.31, pp. 10-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. NA WO 106.61.7, pp. 2-5; BL IOR.L.PS.10.836, pp. 36-37. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. NA FO 608.179, p. 281. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. BL IOR.L.PS.10.836, p. 223. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. NA FO 608.179, pp. 282-285. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. NA WO 106.61.13 pp. 3-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. BL IOR.L.PS.10.836, p. 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. BL IOR.L.PS.10.836, p. 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. NA WO 106.61.19, p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. BL IOR.L.PS.10.836, pp. 79, 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. NA WO 106.61.17, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. BL IOR.L.PS.10.836, p. 7-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. There is likely more to be done in tracing the precise effects of British intervention into the archival materials left by the Communist Party when planning Central Asia’s national delimitation. Research in Ashgabat is restricted for political reasons and the 2020 pandemic crisis has limited access to other relevant post-Soviet archives. As such this avenue of inquiry remains. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. BL IOR.L.PS.10.836, pp. 14-15; NA WO 106.61.19, pp. 5-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. NA WO 106.61.5, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. BL IOR.L.PS.10.836, p. 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. BL IOR.L.PS.10.836, p. 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)