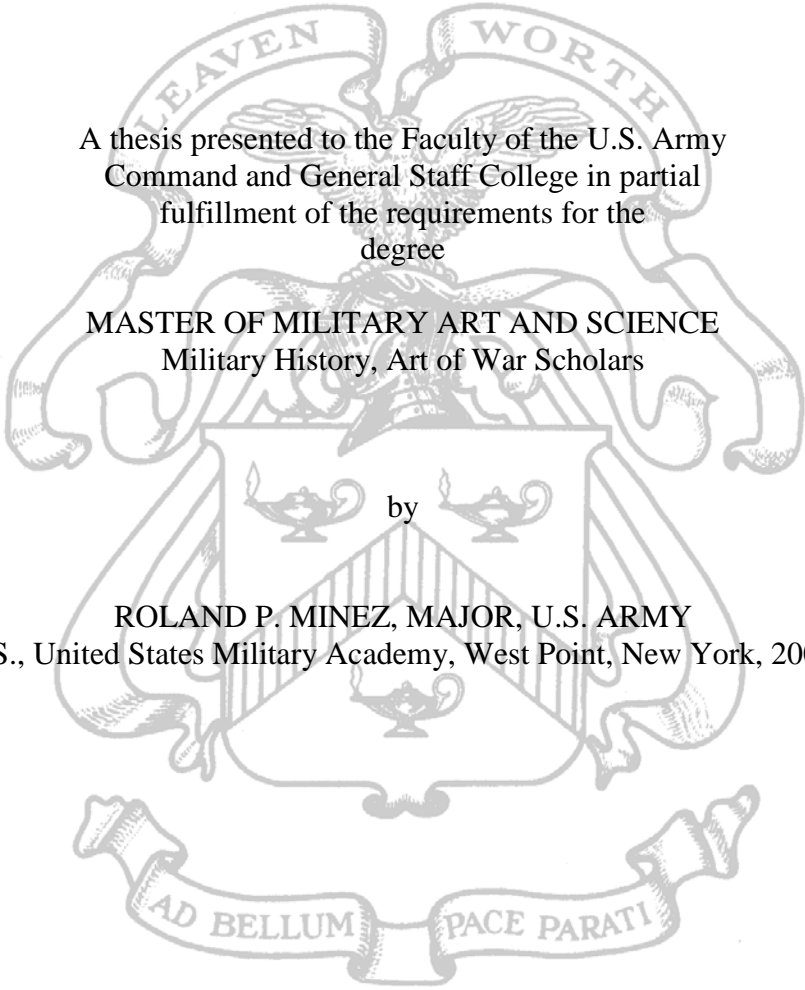


AT THE LIMIT OF COMPLEXITY—BRITISH MILITARY OPERATIONS IN NORTH
PERSIA AND THE CAUCASUS 1918



A thesis presented to the Faculty of the U.S. Army
Command and General Staff College in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE
Military History, Art of War Scholars

by

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ABSTRACT

AT THE LIMIT OF COMPLEXITY—BRITISH MILITARY OPERATIONS IN NORTH PERSIA AND THE CAUCASUS 1918, by Major Roland P. Minez, 190 pages.

In a largely forgotten chapter of the First World War, Britain sent a small task force to Northern Persia and the Caucasus in 1918. This group, named Dunsterforce, attempted to organize indigenous forces to defeat an Ottoman Empire offensive to seize the southern Caucasus. A comprehensive campaign study of Dunsterforce and an analysis of its successes and failures provide insights into the complexities of modern armed conflict. An understanding of the strategic environment in which Dunsterforce operated, the interests of the various actors in the region, and the lines of operation that Dunsterforce chose to accomplish his objectives may enable practitioners of the art of war to face the difficulties inherent in such operations. Dunsterforce's successes were due to the coordinated and skillful use of all elements of British military and national power, no matter how inadequate that actual power was. Yet there are limits to what skill alone can achieve and those limits were revealed during the operation. The scant troops available, conflicting guidance from higher headquarters, lackluster will of indigenous forces, and immense complexity of the operating environment ensured that Dunsterforce did not achieve all the lofty goals envisioned by British political leaders.

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ACRONYMS

AHEC	U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center
AIR	Air Ministry Files
ANZAC	Australian and New Zealand Army Corps
CAB	Cabinet Office Files
CGSS	U.S. Army Command and General Staff School
CIGS	Commander of the Imperial General Staff
DMI	Director of Military Intelligence
GAAT	Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey
GOC	General Officer Commanding
IWM	Imperial War Museum in London, UK
IOR	India Office Records held at the British Library in London, UK
MALMISS	Expedition under the command of Major General Wilfrid Malleon
MEF	Mesopotamian Expeditionary Force
MIO	British Directorate of Military Intelligence and Operations
NCO	Non-Commissioned Officers
NORPER	North Persia Force, name of task force that succeeded Dunsterforce
PRO	Public Records Office, documents now residing at the National Archives, Kew, UK
WO	War Office Files

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

August 27, the Turks have made a successful attack on our very weak right - our losses being three officers and 70 men of the N. Staffords killed, and 11 officers and 35 men wounded. The attack was a very determined one and had Baku troops been there I'm afraid Baku would have been taken . . . As it is, the risk of the town being taken is so great that I dare not keep this Diary by me anymore.

— Major General L. C. Dunsterville, *Personal Diaries*

Prologue

On the evening of 14 September 1918 the sun set on the embattled port of Baku. A fierce struggle raged between British troops and the Army of Islam for control of the southern ridges that dominated the city. The elegant metropolis built by oil wealth on the Caspian Sea was about to fall to the Ottomans.¹

For even as the mortally wounded British Major Beresford Havelock encouraged the men of the North Staffordshire regiment to hold those vital southern ridges, the overall British commander, Major General L. C. Dunsterville had ordered the city's evacuation.² Under cover of the approaching darkness, Dunsterville hoped to save the remaining British forces and equipment. The Ottomans were dangerously close to the city center. Moreover, the British were allied with a disparate group of indigenous revolutionary forces that would view any withdrawal as a betrayal.

¹ L. C. Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce* (London, England: Edward Arnold, 1920), 304.

² Havelock was the grandson of famous British officer, Major General Sir Henry Havelock who died in 1857 following the siege of Lucknow in India.

Dunsterforce gave the order to secretly begin the retrograde at 8 p.m.; with the North Staffords given the unenviable task of holding the ridge until 9 p.m. to allow their comrades an opportunity to board ships lying at anchor alongside the city quays.³ Sick and wounded were boarded first. Guards stationed themselves discretely at key intersections in the city and reinforced the entrances to the pier. British troops began marching back under the shadows of the baroque buildings, scarred by shellfire, standing as broken testaments to Baku's glory days.⁴ Three lights on the mast of the British flagship served as a beacon to any individual soldiers who found themselves separated from their units in the chaos of night urban combat.⁵

³ PRO WO 95/5043 Report by Lieutenant Colonel Keyworth to Headquarters Dunsterforce dated 19 September 1918.

⁴ Ronald G. Suny, *The Baku Commune 1917-1918: Class and Nationality in the Russian Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 305.



Figure 1. The Staffords advancing under Turkish machine gun fire towards the position of the Binagardy Oil Wells in Baku, evacuated by Armenian troops

Source: Imperial War Museum (Photo, London, UK, 26 August 1918 © IWM, Q 24853), accessed 20 February 2016, <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205071576>.

Context

How and why did a British task force find itself deep in the Caucasus, far from support, amongst conflicting revolutionary and ethnic factions, fighting the Ottoman Army in the final months of World War I? While the British retreated from Baku, the tide had irrevocably turned in the greater conflict. Over a month earlier, on 8 August, 1918, the British Army offensive near Amiens on the Western Front had resulted in what Germany's de facto military ruler, Erich Ludendorff, called "the black day of the German Army."⁶

Yet the Central Powers were still on the offensive in the Caucasus. The allure of Caspian oil, the opportunity for a new Turkic ethnic empire, and the perceived

⁶ Erich Ludendorff, *Ludendorff's Own Story* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1919), 326.

vulnerability of British India inspired fresh efforts in the region by both the Ottomans and Germans. Their rival objectives in the Caucasus would bring these erstwhile partners into conflict.

The collapse of the Tsarist Russian Empire left a dangerous gap to the north of British Forces in the Middle East.⁷ It was into this gap that Dunsterville was meant to plug his small number of troops. The original objectives of this task force, named Dunsterforce after its commander, were ambitious. Policy makers in the British government dreamt up the operation in the previous century's tradition of economy of force colonial missions. However, support for Dunsterforce was placed under the skeptical control of a British command in Baghdad that had painfully learned the requirements of modern mechanized warfare.⁸

⁷ John Buchan, *A History of the Great War: IV* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1922), 299.

⁸ Roger Ford, *Eden to Armageddon: World War I in the Middle East* (New York: Pegasus, 2010), 193.

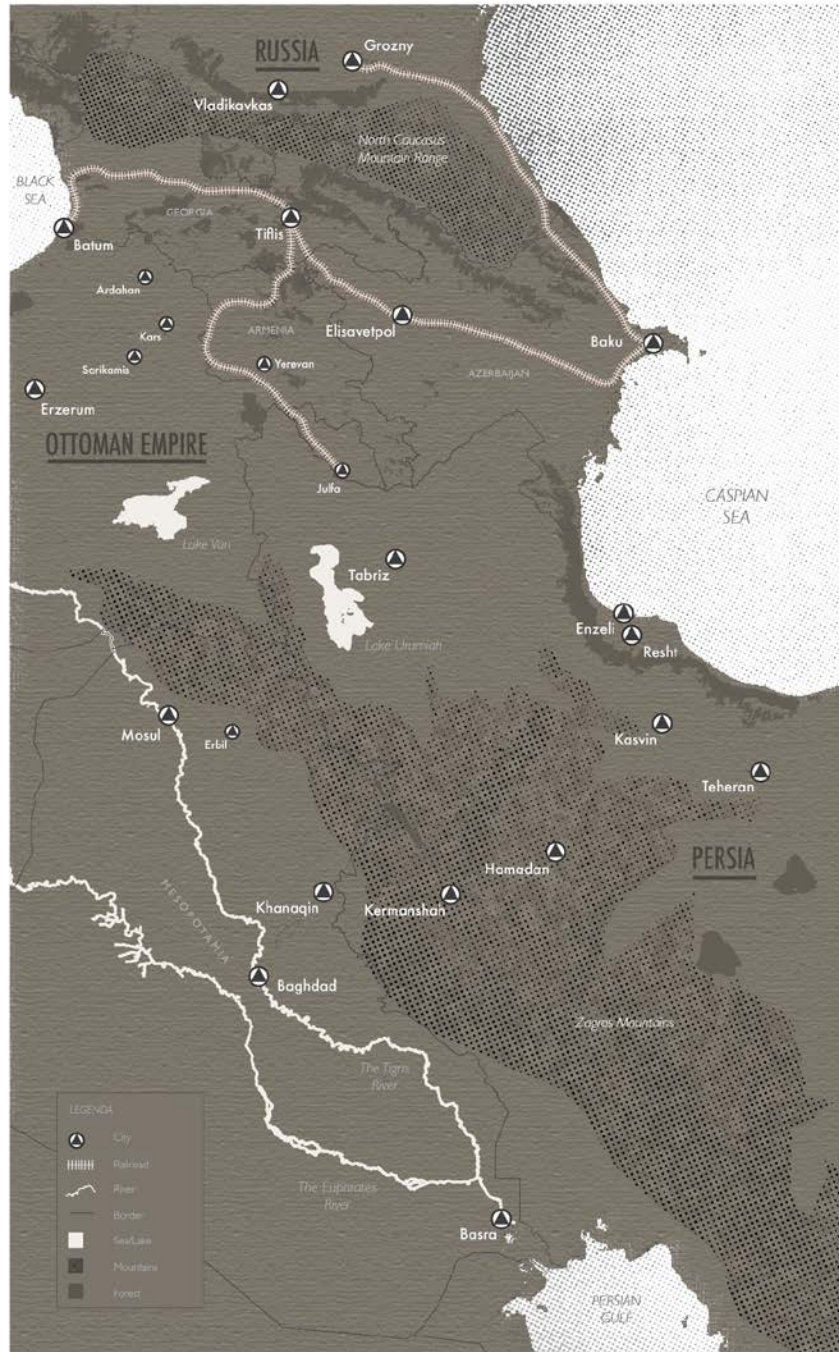


Figure 2. Area of Operations 1917-1918

Source: Created by Sven Hoogerheide, concept by author.

Furthermore, the disruptions caused by the First World War and the Russian revolution of the previous year unleashed a cauldron of conflicting groups in the Caucasus seeking an advantage from the confused situation.⁹ Dunsterville and his men would have to navigate this environment to accomplish their mission.

Relevance

A campaign study of Dunsterforce and an analysis of its successes and failures provide insights into the complexities of modern armed conflict. An understanding of the strategic environment in which Dunsterforce operated, the interests of the various actors in the region, and the lines of operation that Dunsterville chose to accomplish his objectives may assist current and future practitioners of the art of war to face the difficulties inherent in such operations.

In addition, if “what’s past is prologue,”¹⁰ then there are few better regions in the world to study military operations. In the Caucasus, the Eurasian landmass meets the Middle East. Flanked by the Black and Caspian Seas, ringed by beautiful mountains, and cursed with abundant natural resources it has long been coveted by great powers.¹¹

Such competition in the region between the great powers continues. The Caspian Sea has been estimated to contain oil and natural gas reserves that exceed that of Kuwait, the Gulf of Mexico, or the North Sea. The ongoing struggle over the control of the energy

⁹ Buchan, *A History of the Great War*, 288.

¹⁰ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act 2, Scene I.

¹¹ Dominic Lieven, *The End of Tsarist Russia* (New York: Viking, 2015), 202.

pipelines through the independent states of the Caucasus will decide how much Russia is able to dominate its former satellites.¹²

As a crossroads between cultures and empires, it is home to diverse ethnicities with a deep sense of history.¹³ Intense nationalist and religious loyalties lead to conflict. The modern descendants of the regional players in this study will be familiar to followers of current events: Turkey, Iran, Russia, Iraq, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Kurdistan.¹⁴

Nor should the issues faced by Dunsterville and his men surprise veterans of America's most recent wars. Since 11 September 2001, the United States has faced numerous setbacks, as well as outright failures, in its efforts to establish capable local security forces. The indigenous forces of today face issues with "poor leadership, a lack of will, and the need to function in the face of intractable political problems"¹⁵ that would sound familiar to members of Dunsterforce.

The United States is not the first to be seduced by the siren song of having proxies fight our wars for us. Nor will we be the last. In 1918, the British Army was committed to the decisive struggle on the Western Front and exhausted from years of bloodletting.

¹² Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Perseus, 1997), 124, 129.

¹³ Karl E. Meyer, *The Dust of Empire: The Race for Mastery in the Asian Heartland* (New York: Century Foundation, 2003), 145.

¹⁴ The U.S. Army Command and General Staff School (CGSS) selected the region to conduct its operational planning exercises, known as the Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey (GAAT) scenario. It was selected, in part, due to the complexity of the operational environment.

¹⁵ Eric Schmitt and Tim Arango, "U.S.'s Billions Fail to Sustain Foreign Forces: Setbacks in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan," *The New York Times*, 4 October 2015.

There were no troops left to defeat the Ottoman offensive in the Caucasus. As such, British policy makers envisioned deploying a small group of elite soldiers to organize the resistance of ethnic groups in the Caucasus to contain the Ottomans.

Yet the daring and resourcefulness of Dunsterforce could not completely overcome the tyranny of the principles of war. The task force lacked the mass necessary to defeat the enemy alone and Dunsterville was unable to establish unity of command over the disparate groups he needed to mobilize. Riven by conflicting ethnic loyalties, and opposing political agendas, these local forces highlight the complex human terrain in which Dunsterforce was required to operate.

The requirement for the U.S. military to operate in complex environments against, and with, multiple actors with diverse interests will continue.¹⁶ As a result, much can be learned from the operational approach chosen by Dunsterville. How did he leverage local actors, mobilize all elements of British imperial power, and integrate special and conventional forces? Where and why was he successful? How did he fail? Did Dunsterforce accomplish its political and military objectives? Answering those questions can help inform the execution of future military operations.

I have a deep personal interest in this topic. As a young infantry officer, I deployed in 2007-2008 to northeastern Iraq adjacent to the area of operations of Dunsterforce in North Persia. While deployed, I was responsible for coordinating Sunni tribal resistance groups in western Diyala province that sprung up to combat Al Qaeda in Iraq, now rebranded as the Islamic State. I learned much about working with indigenous

¹⁶ Department of the Army, Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Pamphlet 535-3-1, *The U.S. Army Operating Concept, Win in a Complex World, 2020-2040* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 31 October 2014).

forces but there remains much more to learn. Looking through the cracked mirror that is the study of history can provide some of those insights.

Later, I became a Foreign Service Officer for the Department of State and an Army Reserve Foreign Area Officer. I hope to help synchronize US strategic, operational, and tactical objectives and better leverage all elements of national power to defend our interests. This study attempts to holistically analyze all levels of war and provide the context in which British policy makers made their decisions.

As students at the US Army Command and General Staff College, we are taught to balance the ends, ways, and means necessary to achieve our strategic objectives.¹⁷ That is not the story you are about to read. For the British in the Caucasus, the ends were ambitious, the means were inadequate, and the ways were unclear. It closely resembles the wars that the US has recently fought, and will be asked to fight in the future. If this study can provide some insight to my colleagues then it will have served its purpose.

Complexity

Today, the political and military leaders of the United States believe that we face a geo-strategic environment more complex than ever before. Yet the world has always been complex.¹⁸ Dunsterforce faced as complex situation in the Caucasus as anything that we face today.

¹⁷ Arthur F. Lykke, Jr. "Towards an Understanding of Military Strategy," in *Military Strategy: Theory and Application*, ed. Arthur F. Lykke, Jr. (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 1989), 3-8.

¹⁸ Clay Mountcastle, PhD, "The Myth of the New Complexity," *Military Review* 96, no. 2 (March-April 2016): 47.

Complexity is defined as having a large number of interacting elements, and the interaction of those elements can cause “disproportionally major consequences.”¹⁹ Furthermore, the system is dynamic and has a history where the “past is integrated with the present.”²⁰ In such circumstances, new studies suggest that leaders should first probe, sense, and then respond, being always ready to adapt to the changing circumstances at hand and aware that there will continue to be host of “unknown unknowns” that will affect any given course of action.²¹ It is through such a rubric that this paper will analyze the 1918 British campaign in northwest Persia and the Caucasus.

Literature Review

A historian has described Dunsterforce’s campaign as the “strangest of many twists on the road to victory.”²² Yet in comparison with other campaigns in the First World War, relatively little study has been dedicated to British operations in North Persia and the Caucasus in 1918. This is not surprising. British participants in World War I routinely referred to those theaters of war outside the Western Front as sideshows.²³ The operations of Dunsterforce are considered a “sideshow of a sideshow.”²⁴

¹⁹ David J. Snowden and Mary E. Boone, “A Leader’s Framework for Decision Making,” *Harvard Business Review* (November 2007): 3.

²⁰ Snowden and Boone, 5.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Alan Palmer, *Victory 1918* (New York: Atlantic, 1998), 195.

²³ Fitzstephen Featherstone John French, *From Whitehall to the Caspian* (London: Odhams Press, 1920), 11.

²⁴ Palmer, 196.

In addition, for many years much of the primary material remained classified. The official history of British operations in Persia, a nominally neutral country, during World War I remained a secret. Out of the limited print run of 500 copies, classified as ‘Confidential’ in Britain and ‘Secret’ in India, 300 were destroyed in 1933.²⁵ As late as the 1950s, an analysis of Dunsterforce by the Canadian Army was classified; no doubt, a result of the sensitivity associated with studying operations in the then Soviet Union.²⁶ Some of the primary sources remained classified until the end of the cold war.²⁷

What little that has been written is conflicting. In fact, modern historians who have studied Dunsterforce do not share a consensus on its objectives or effectiveness. For those who look at the operations of Dunsterforce as an adjunct of the greater Mesopotamian campaign it appears a ‘quixotic’ expedition.²⁸ These historians see it as an operation ordered by British political leaders, irrationally paranoid of the Ottoman threat, with little understanding how dangerously exposed the force would be.²⁹

²⁵ F. J. Moberly, *Operations in Persia* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1929).

²⁶ J. A. Swettenham, *Canadians in Mesopotamia 1918-1919* (Report no. 84 Historical Section, Canadian Army Headquarters, 20 October 1959, Declassified 1987).

²⁷ PRO WO/95/4960, Report from Major G. M. Goldsmith, acting British Military Agent, Army of Caucasus Front to the Director of Military Intelligence (DMI), London, 1 July 1919.

²⁸ A. J. Barker, *The Bastard War: The Mesopotamian Campaign of 1914-1918* (New York: Dial Press, 1967), 394.

²⁹ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *The First World War in the Middle East* (London: Hurst and Company, 2014).

Others see Dunsterforce as a prototype for future special operations.³⁰ These works highlight the successes, revel in the adventure, and downplay the failures of the expedition.³¹ In a similar vein, some works have stressed the intelligence operations conducted but not studied the entirety of the campaign.³²

Soviet historians have provided important scholarship on Entente “interventions” in Russia during the final years of the First World War. This includes the operations of Dunsterforce. That being said, these works are restricted by the time and place where they were made. Seen through the lens of the Cold War, the actions of Dunsterforce are a clear attempt by a capitalist power to destroy the nascent communist revolution and seize natural resources.³³

Finally, excellent studies have focused on the political context in the region. Some of these works provide insight into the ethnic and political struggles in the Caucasus.³⁴ Other recent works explain the geostrategic imperatives of the Ottoman Empire, Russia,

³⁰ Timothy C. Winegard, “Dunsterforce: A Case Study of Coalition Warfare in the Middle East. 1918-1919,” *Canadian Army Journal* 8, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 93-109.

³¹ Peter Hopkirk, *Like a Hidden Fire: the plot to bring down the British Empire* (New York: Kodansha International, 1994).

³² A. J. Plotke, *Imperial Spies Invade Russia: The British Intelligence Interventions, 1918* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993).

³³ Leonid Vasilevich Mitrokhin, *The Failure of three Missions: British diplomacy and intelligence in the efforts to overthrow Soviet government in Central Asia and Transcaucasia* (Moscow, Russia: Progress Publishing, 1987).

³⁴ Firuz Kazemzadeh, *The Struggle for Transcaucasia: 1917-1921* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1951).

and the United Kingdom.³⁵ Similarly, there are comprehensive works on World War I in the Middle East as well a classic study of all the military campaigns in the Caucasus.³⁶ None of these works have focused exclusively on Dunsterforce and beyond a few short articles, there has not been a recent in-depth study of the entire Dunsterforce campaign.

Organization

As a result, this work attempts to study British operations in North Persia and the Caucasus in a new light. This is a campaign study of Dunsterforce. Unlike previous works that have studied Dunsterforce only in the context of the greater Middle East and Caucasus fronts or solely focused on the defense of Baku, this work will analyze the entirety of the campaign.

This work benefits from significant archival research at the National Archives, British Library, and Imperial War Museum in the United Kingdom. Access to British cabinet decisions, internal military communications, and the personal papers of participants provides a greater understanding of the campaign. Some of these papers discovered during research for this work, including that of a key Dunsterforce staff officer, have not been cited in previous publications. Such new understanding augments the analysis of the campaign.

³⁵ Sean McMeekin, *The Ottoman Endgame: War, Revolution, and the Making of the Modern Middle East, 1908-1923* (New York: Penguin Press, 2015); Suny and John Fisher, *Curzon and British Imperialism in the Middle East, 1916-1919* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1999).

³⁶ Roger Ford, *Eden to Armageddon: World War I in the Middle East* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2010); W. E. D. Allen and Paul Muratoff, *Caucasian Battlefields: A History of the Wars on the Turco-Caucasian Border 1828-1921* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1953).

This campaign study will examine the strategic imperatives faced by Britain in the Middle East and Caucasus in 1918. It will identify the political and military objectives of the campaign and analyze whether Dunsterforce was successful. This work will consider all levels of war from the strategic to the tactical but its focus will be on the operational art. How did Dunsterville address the complex variables he faced? What were the lines of operation he chose to accomplish his mission? Were they successful?

The second chapter examines the global strategic environment in 1918 and the objectives and interests of key actors in the Middle East and the Caucasus. The third chapter explains why and how Dunsterforce was established and what British policy makers hoped to achieve. The fourth chapter provides an overview of the political and military situation in the Caucasus and describes the operations conducted by members of Dunsterforce to shape the campaign. The fifth chapter analyzes the lines of operation chosen by Dunsterville to secure North Persia. The sixth chapter focuses on the defense and evacuation of Baku. The seventh expands on the aftermath in the region. The eighth chapter evaluates the results of the campaign and suggests insights that can inform future operations in complex environments.

Thesis

Ultimately, Dunsterforce was able to achieve its military objective to delay the capture of Baku's oil fields by the Central Powers and stabilize the security situation in Northwest Persia. Conversely, the British failed to achieve its larger political objectives to strengthen the ethnic groups in Caucasia in order to deny the strategic region to both the Ottomans and Bolsheviks. Its successes were due to the coordinated and skillful use of all elements of British military and national power, no matter how inadequate such

actual military power was. Yet there are limits to what skill alone can achieve and those limits were revealed during the operation. The scant troops available, conflicting guidance from higher headquarters, lackluster will of indigenous forces, and immense complexity of the operating environment ensured that Dunsterforce did not achieve all the lofty goals envisioned by the British political leaders in London and Delhi. The men of Dunsterforce operated at the limit of complexity and beyond.

CHAPTER 2

THE GEOPOLITICAL SITUATION 1917- 1918

Our Consuls in Turkey and India, our agents, etc., must rouse the whole Moslem world into wild rebellion . . . if we are going to shed our blood, then England must at least lose India.¹

— Kaiser Wilhelm II

The Global Strategic Environment

In January 1918, none of the belligerents could confidently predict the outcome of the ongoing titanic struggle known to us now as the First World War. The conflict had begun over three years before, and the size and scope of the war dwarfed the expectations of both sides. Amidst this uncertainty, few military and political leaders believed the war would end within the year.² Yet all sides realized 1917 ushered in profound political and military changes that altered the calculus of the conflict. As a result, the belligerents braced for a climactic year in the struggle, none sure of the outcome.

The participants themselves looked first to the Western Front. During the first three years, this had been the key arena of the war where most combatant powers had allocated the majority of their forces. From Switzerland to the English Channel, in France and Belgium, the massive armies of these powers had slaughtered each other in seesaw battles over well-developed defensive positions. 1918 would prove no different. The United States had only recently entered the war and the Allies, also known as the Entente,

¹ Hew Strachan, *The First World War* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 101.

² Michael S. Neiberg, *Fighting the Great War: A Global History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 333.

impatiently awaited the arrival of American forces to reinforce their badly depleted armies and alter the balance of power on the Western Front.³

Yet it was on the Eastern and Middle Eastern Fronts where the most significant changes had occurred.⁴ The Tsarist Russian Empire had been convulsed by revolution and left the war. Russia had previously suffered a string of catastrophic defeats fighting the Germans on the Eastern Front. Following the abdication of the Tsar, in March 1917, the embryonic government led by Alexander Kerensky attempted to remain in the struggle in accordance with the agreements made with the other Entente powers- notably France and Great Britain. In November 1917, a communist coup within the revolution seized control of the country.⁵ This communist group, known as the Bolsheviks, and their leader, Vladimir Lenin, demanded that Russia leave the war. The rallying cry energized elements within the Soviets, or councils of workers and soldiers, to side with the Bolsheviks.⁶

Germany orchestrated Lenin's entry into Russia during the upheaval. As a result, the Entente powers believed that Lenin was an agent of Germany and refused to recognize the Bolshevik regime.⁷ Regardless, the Russian collapse enabled Germany to

³ Palmer, 165.

⁴ Buchan, *A History of the Great War*, 288.

⁵ Alan Moorehead, *The Russian Revolution* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), 233.

⁶ George F. Kennan, *Russia Leaves the War: The Americans in Petrograd and the Bolshevik Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1956), 10.

⁷ Michael Occleshaw, *Dances in Deep Shadows: The Clandestine War in Russia 1917-20* (New York: Carrol and Graf, 2006), 9.

mass its troops in the west for planned offensives meant to destroy the Allies before the arrival of more American forces.⁸ Russia's exit also opened up opportunities for Germany and her Ottoman Empire ally in the Middle East and Central Asia.⁹

When the war began, the Ottoman Empire controlled much of the Middle East. Its capital was the ancient city of Constantinople, also referred to as Istanbul. Although it ruled many people and religions, its core was Turkish Anatolia and its power resided firmly with the Sunni Muslim Turks.¹⁰ The Empire was nominally led by a Sultan, who also held religious authority over the world's Sunni Muslims through his title of Caliph. In 1908, a group of energetic liberal reformers, popularly known as the Young Turks, seized power and made the Sultan a figurehead.¹¹

In October 1914, the Young Turks led the Ottoman Empire to formally join the Central Powers, an alliance that included Imperial Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire.¹² The Ottomans hoped to protect their empire against their traditional antagonist-Tsarist Russia- as well as encroaching French and British interests.¹³ Their alliance with Germany built upon ties begun in earnest by Kaiser Wilhelm II before the war.¹⁴ Most

⁸ Moberly, 268.

⁹ McMeekin, 369.

¹⁰ Jacob M. Landau, *Pan-Turkism in Turkey: A Study in Irredentism* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1981), 31.

¹¹ Strachan, 105.

¹² Edward Mead Earle, *Turkey, the Great Powers, and the Bagdad Railway: A Study in Imperialism* (New York: Macmillan, 1935), 278.

¹³ David R. Stone, *The Russian Army in the Great War: The Eastern Front, 1914-1917* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2015), 181.

notably, these ties included the planned Berlin-Baghdad railway and a sizable German military mission sent to modernize Ottoman forces.¹⁵

The Young Turk leaders also hoped to retake long lost provinces in Caucasia from Russia and eliminate British and Italian de facto control of Ottoman territories in Egypt and Libya.¹⁶ The Minister of War, Enver Pasha, had even grander designs to expand the Ottoman Empire.

Enver dominated the formulation of Ottoman military strategy during the First World War. Dynamic, creative, and aggressive, he sought glorious military victories for the Ottoman Empire. The pursuit of such grand designs and his innate optimism led him to overestimate the capabilities of his forces and underestimate the obstacles in his path.¹⁷ As an avowed Turkish nationalist, he was the principal advocate of a Pan-Turkic policy to unify Turkic ethnic relatives in the Caucasus, Persia, and central Asia.¹⁸

By 1918, these Ottoman aspirations had been thwarted in a series of stinging defeats. In the midst of the winter of 1914-1915, Enver Pasha personally oversaw a bold

¹⁴ Hopkirk, *Like a Hidden Fire*, 22.

¹⁵ Richard Hart Sinnreich, "About Turn: British Strategic Transformation from Salisbury to Grey," in *The Shaping of Grand Strategy: Policy, Diplomacy, and War*, ed. Williamson Murray (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 132.

¹⁶ Earle, 276.

¹⁷ Edward J. Erickson, *Ordered to Die: A History of the Ottoman Army in the First World War* (WestPort, CT: Greenwood, 2001), 218.

¹⁸ Pan-Turkish or Pan-Turkic ideology is closely related to pan-Turanism, although the first focuses on the ethnic while the second focuses on shared linguistic origins. See T. Lothrop Stoddard, "Pan-Turanism," *The American Political Science Review* 11, no. 1 (February 1917): 12-23.

but foolhardy offensive across the snow covered Caucasus Mountains that attempted to envelop Russian forces.¹⁹ After suffering immensely in the frigid weather, an Ottoman detachment reached the city of Sarakamis,²⁰ only to be destroyed.²¹ Ill equipped for the subzero temperatures, the Ottoman Third Army suffered a catastrophic defeat losing 75,000 men and most of its artillery.²²

The Russians launched their own offensive in January 1916, targeting the prized fortress city of Erzerum.²³ In a brilliantly conceived assault, during the night of 13 February, Russian troops climbing, and sometimes crawling over their coats to avoid sinking into snowdrifts over five to six feet deep, seized the commanding heights, and turned the remaining Ottoman outer defenses.²⁴ On 16 February, the Russians entered the city itself. The loss of Erzerum was so devastating that it was hidden from the Ottoman Sultan for several months.²⁵ The Tsarist armies, before their own collapse, also defeated Ottoman offensives in Persia, today known as Iran. Moreover, although Ottoman forces

¹⁹ Stone, 190.

²⁰ Sometimes also spelled Sary-Kamish.

²¹ McMeekin, 149-151.

²² W. E. D. Allen and Paul Muratoff, *Caucasian Battlefields: A History of the Wars on the Turco-Caucasian Border 1828-1921* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 284.

²³ M. Philips Price, *War and Revolution in Asiatic Russia* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1918), 70.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 80.

²⁵ Documentary Film, *Blood and Oil: The Middle East in World War I* (Inecom Entertainment Company, 2006), minute 33.

successfully repulsed the Allies in battles over the Dardanelle Straits, their own Egyptian offensives were quickly defeated.²⁶

The Strategic Outlook of the British in the Middle East 1917-1918

The Ottoman threats to British controlled Egypt directly targeted the sea line of communication between Britain and her colonies and dominions in the East.²⁷ Australia, New Zealand, and British India, among other territories, were key providers of manpower and other resources throughout the First World War.²⁸ All such men and material passed through the Suez Canal in Egypt, the objective of two daring but unsuccessful offensives by the Ottomans.²⁹ Before World War I, the Ottomans had continued to exercise official control over Egypt in uneasy coordination with Britain and the semi-independent Egyptian Governor.³⁰ The security, and perceived vulnerability, of the Suez Canal drove the British to commit increasing resources to the Middle East and search for ways to defeat the Ottomans.

By 1917, the British were advancing in the Arabian Peninsula, Palestine, and Iraq, then known to the British as Mesopotamia. In the Arabian Peninsula, Arab irregular forces famously aided by British officers such as T.E. Lawrence seized isolated garrison

²⁶ Ulrichsen, 103.

²⁷ Sinnreich, 128.

²⁸ A. J. Stockwell, "The War and the British Empire," in *Britain and the First World War*, ed. John Turner (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 37; French, 22.

²⁹ Ulrichsen, 103.

³⁰ Eugene Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans* (New York: Perseus Books, 2015), 91.

towns and harassed Ottoman forces. In Palestine, a British Army under General Edmund Allenby broke through Ottoman defenses and entered Jerusalem before Christmas 1917.³¹

In Mesopotamia, initial British successes in seizing the access to the Persian Gulf and the city of Basra led to overextension and disaster. In one of the greatest defeats in British military history, a force surrendered to the Ottomans after a lengthy siege at Kut al-Almara in 1916.³² British reorganization and reinforcement under General Stanley Maude ultimately led to the successful capture of Baghdad in March 1917.³³

Meanwhile, Persia, an ostensibly neutral country, had become an arena of conflict between the warring states.³⁴ In 1907, Britain and Russia divided the nominally independent country into spheres of influence.³⁵ The Russians would oversee the northern third of the country and the British would likewise control the southern third. The center third of Persia would remain independent of foreign domination.³⁶ This treaty ended the competition in Asia between both powers, popularly known as the Great Game,

³¹ Scott Anderson, *Lawrence in Arabia: War, Deceit, Imperial Folly and the Making of the Middle East* (New York: Doubleday, 2013), 406.

³² Efraim Karsh and Inari Karsh, *Empires of the Sand: The Struggle for Mastery in the Middle East 1789-1923* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 147.

³³ Barker, 329.

³⁴ G. Demorgny, *La Question Persane et La Guerre-The Persian Question and the War* (Paris, France: Recueil Sirey, 1916), 287.

³⁵ W. Morgan Shuster, *The Strangling of Persia* (New York: The Century Co., 1912), xxiv.

³⁶ Touraj Atabaki, *Iran and the First World: Battleground of the Great Powers* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 1.

and enabled their alliance during the war.³⁷ The Persians greatly resented this violation of their sovereignty.³⁸

Furthermore, the British discovered oil in Persia before the First World War.³⁹ This source of fuel was increasingly essential for the operation of the Royal Navy fleet.⁴⁰ It was initially in defense of these oil fields that Britain had attacked Mesopotamia in 1914.⁴¹

During the First World War, Russia and Britain deployed forces to Persia to secure their interests in the officially neutral country and deny its terrain and resources to the Central Powers.⁴² Earlier in 1917, Russian Cossacks linked up with British forces in Mesopotamia in the first tentative steps of a dreamed unified front against the Ottomans. The subsequent Russian collapse following the revolution left a gaping hole to the north and east of the British in Mesopotamia.⁴³ By December 1917, the rise of the Bolsheviks and successes of the Central Powers emboldened Persian nationalists who placed

³⁷ Sinnreich, 138.

³⁸ Moberley, 36.

³⁹ Charles Townshend, *When God Made Hell: The British Invasion of Mesopotamia and the Creation of Iraq, 1914-1921* (London: Faber, 2010), xxii.

⁴⁰ Occleshaw, 250.

⁴¹ Townshend, 3-4.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 85.

⁴³ Allen and Muratoff, 449.

increasing pressure on the government they perceived as collaborating with the Entente. British authorities worried that Persia might erupt and support the Central Powers.⁴⁴

The objectives of the Ottoman Empire and Germany
in the Caucasus and Northern Persia 1918

Entente successes on the Middle Eastern Fronts placed increasing strain on the war-weary Ottoman Empire and resulted in the loss of significant Ottoman territory. Yet the Russian collapse in 1917 provided new opportunities to make up for those losses. The temporary weakness of their colossal nemesis, Russia, encouraged the Ottomans to redraw the geopolitical boundaries.⁴⁵ Enver Pasha wanted to seize the Caucasus and Trans-Caspian regions from a defeated Russia and the embryonic ethnic state(s) that had sprung up in the power vacuum.⁴⁶ He also hoped to overwhelm Persia and envelop the British in Mesopotamia.⁴⁷

These plans built upon previous designs by both Germany and the Ottomans.⁴⁸ A key objective of the Germans in securing an alliance with the Ottomans earlier in the war was to leverage the religious authority of the Ottoman Sultan as Caliph to mobilize Muslim inhabitants of the British, Russian, and French Empires in a holy war against

⁴⁴ Moberley, 270.

⁴⁵ Michael A. Reynolds, *Shattering Empires: The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires 1908-1918* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 219.

⁴⁶ McMeekin, 384.

⁴⁷ Erickson, 188-189.

⁴⁸ Herbert Adams Gibbons, *The New Map of Europe 1911-1914: The Story of the Recent European Diplomatic Crises and Wars and of Europe's Present Catastrophe* (New York: The Century Co., 1914), 59.

their rulers. At the time, the British Empire had the largest Muslim population in the world, greater even than the Ottoman Empire itself.⁴⁹ Three weeks after the Ottomans entered the war, the Sultan-Caliph issued a *fatwa*, or religious ruling.⁵⁰ It was read aloud in all the mosques of the Ottoman Empire and propaganda leaflets were smuggled into the Entente's Muslim domains calling for "annihilation of the enemies of Islam."⁵¹

One of the most enticing targets of this campaign was India, the centerpiece of the British Empire.⁵² It held a large Muslim population, a burgeoning independence movement, and a history of violent insurrection against British rule.⁵³ Germany dispatched military, diplomatic, and intelligence officers to Persia and Afghanistan to incite local tribes against the Entente powers. They ultimately hoped to convince the rulers of both those states to join the Ottomans and declare war against the British Empire opening the way for an assault on India itself.⁵⁴ Such covert maneuvers were conducted in conjunction with two prior conventional Ottoman offensives into Persia that were

⁴⁹ Occleshaw, 248.

⁵⁰ Hopkirk, *Like a Hidden Fire*, 60.

⁵¹ Ahmed Emin, *Turkey in the World War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1930), 174. The Germans and some Ottoman officials favored this Pan-Islamic initiative, focused on shared faith. Other Ottoman officials, as described earlier, placed greater emphasis on Pan-Turkic initiatives. Touraj Atabaki, *Iran and the First World: Battleground of the Great Powers* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 301-31.

⁵² Friederich Von Bernhardi, *Britain as Germany's Vassal* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1913), 213.

⁵³ Major M. Larcher, *La Guerre Turque dans la Guerre Mondiale* (Paris: Berger Levrault, 1926), 469.

⁵⁴ Moberley, 54-56.

checked by the Tsarist Russian Army.⁵⁵ These initiatives destabilized Persia but did not succeed in directly threatening British control there or in India.⁵⁶

By 1918, these earlier goals to foment insurrection were now joined by the desperate need of both the Ottomans and Germans to secure the raw materials necessary to continue prosecuting the war. The Caucasus could supply the cotton⁵⁷ and oil that the Central Powers craved; Baku itself had over two hundred oil refineries before the war.⁵⁸ In the 1890s, the city provided around 50 percent of the world's oil needs. While the war adversely affected production, Baku still produced 7 million tons of oil every year. In 1918, there were 2,000 oil wells in the vicinity of the city.⁵⁹ British business interests controlled 60 percent of this production.⁶⁰

Therein lay the seeds for a rupture in the alliance between Germany and the Ottomans. In late November 1917, the Bolsheviks radioed the Germans on the Eastern European front requesting a ceasefire. Enver Pasha, sensing an opportunity, instructed the commander of the Ottoman 3rd Army in the Caucasus, Vehib Pasha, to propose a similar

⁵⁵ Erickson, 65 and 152-153.

⁵⁶ Hopkirk, *Like a Hidden Fire*, 246.

⁵⁷ Cotton was needed for the production of explosives. See Occleshaw, 270.

⁵⁸ Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 59.

⁵⁹ Lieutenant General Sir William Marshall, *Memories of Four Fronts* (London: Ernest Benn, 1929), 311.

⁶⁰ Ford, 443.

ceasefire with Russian forces in the Caucasus. On 18 December, the Russian Caucasus Army signed an armistice with the Ottomans.⁶¹



Figure 3. The oil fields at Binagardy, Baku

Source: Imperial War Museum (Photo, London, UK, 1918: © IWM, Q 24903), accessed 20 February 2016, <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205213354>.

On 22 December 1917, Germany led a Central Powers delegation to negotiate the removal of Russia from the war. In Brest-Litovsk, they demanded huge tracts of land from within the borders of the now defunct Russian Empire. Nevertheless, the aspirations of the Ottomans and Germans clashed over the Caucasus, where both powers had long ties: the Germans with the Georgians around Tiflis, now Tbilisi, and the Ottomans with

⁶¹ Reynolds, *Shattering Empire*, 170-171.

the ethnic Turkic peoples that stretched into Central Asia.⁶² Both powers set their sights on the prize of Baku and its oilfields.⁶³

Erich Ludendorff, the Quartermaster General of the German Army and de facto military ruler of Germany, stated:

We could not rely on Turkey in the matter . . . we could expect to get oil from Baku only if we helped ourselves. The shortage of fuel at home . . . were only too firmly impressed on my memory . . . the Army's reserves of fuel had run out, and we felt the shortage keenly. Oil was needed. . . . It now seemed possible to supplement it from trans-Caucasian sources, and in particular from Baku.⁶⁴

In January 1918, the Ottoman forces in the Caucasus consisted of the Third Army commanded by Vehip Pasha. The Third Army had three corps with nine divisions.⁶⁵ As the Ottoman offensive developed, Enver Pasha would dispatch additional forces and create a new force called the Army of Islam to conquer Baku.

The interests of Russians, Armenians, Georgians, Azeri/Tartars, Kurds, and Persians in the Caucasus and neighboring regions 1917-1918

Then and now, diverse ethnic groups with a deep sense of history and complex alliances inhabit the Caucasus and neighboring regions.⁶⁶ An Arab geographer in the Middle Ages noted the immense diversity and named the region a “mountain of tongues.”⁶⁷ The First World War fragmented the traditional balance of power both

⁶² McMeekin, 385.

⁶³ Ibid., 383.

⁶⁴ Ludendorff, 302.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 181.

⁶⁶ Lieven, 203.

⁶⁷ J. C. Catford, “Mountain of Tongues: The Languages of the Caucasus,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 6, 1 (1977): 283.

amongst these ethnicities and outside powers.⁶⁸ In 1917 and 1918, these groups would scramble to best take advantage of the new dynamics.

The Russians had long dominated the region but the revolution splintered their power. Tsarist army officers, nobles, Cossacks, and some businessmen began to coalesce in order to reinstate the Tsarist regime. Across the Caucasus, they allied with any group willing to oppose the Bolsheviks. In addition, the Tsarist Russian Army in the region had been victorious on the battlefield and the relationship between the men and their officers stronger. As a result, the spontaneous demobilization and violent reprisals against officers that occurred on the Eastern Front were slower to appear in the Russian forces of the Caucasus and Persia.⁶⁹ Yet power was now with the revolutionary councils established by workers and soldiers.⁷⁰ The revolutionaries themselves were divided between the Bolsheviks and other rivals such as the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries.⁷¹

The Armenians were spread across the Ottoman Empire, Russia, and Persia and suffered greatly during the war. Identified by the Ottomans as conspirators with their fellow Christian Russians, they had undergone widespread slaughter and ethnic cleansing in territories under Ottoman control.⁷² Somewhere between 500,000 and one million

⁶⁸ Buchan, *A History of the Great War*, 298.

⁶⁹ Allen and Muratoff, 457.

⁷⁰ Richard W. Harrison, *The Russian Way of War: Operational Art 1904-1940* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 71.

⁷¹ Reynolds, *Shattering Empires*, 191-192.

⁷² McMeekin, 238.

Armenians died.⁷³ A further 200,000 to 300,000 Ottoman Armenian refugees sought sanctuary in Russian territory.⁷⁴

In 1917 and 1918, the Armenians of the Caucasus lost their Russian Army shield. They braced for an Ottoman onslaught and sought any allies who could help them withstand it.⁷⁵ As Christians, the Georgians also feared an Ottoman seizure of their territory, but they had ties to Germany and hoped to use those relationships to protect them from the Ottomans.⁷⁶

The Caucasus held numerous Muslim ethnicities: Ajars, Azeris, Tatars, and others.⁷⁷ Of these, the most numerous and powerful were the Azeris.⁷⁸ The Azeris spoke a Turkish dialect but most were members of the Shia branch of the Islamic faith and thus had cultural ties to both the Ottoman Empire and Persia.⁷⁹ The Muslims of the Caucasus were then all commonly referred to as Tartars.⁸⁰

⁷³ Stone, 192.

⁷⁴ Peter Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia During World War I* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 52.

⁷⁵ Kennan, 167.

⁷⁶ McMeekin, 382.

⁷⁷ Azeris are also sometimes referred to as Azerbaijanis, this work will use the term Azeris, and more generally Tartars, because the narrative begins before the independence of Azerbaijan and includes those ethnic members outside the formal boundaries of the state of Azerbaijan. Karsh and Karsh, 148.

⁷⁸ Kazemzadeh, 4.

⁷⁹ Charles Warren Hostler, *Turkism and the Soviets: The Turks of the World and their Political Objectives* (New York: Praeger, 1957), 19.

⁸⁰ The term Tartar was used until the 1930s. Suny, 16.

Many Tartars welcomed their newfound freedom from Russian rule and as Muslims did not generally fear an Ottoman advance.⁸¹ In fact, Enver Pasha invited a delegation of Tartar notables to Constantinople to discuss the possibility of an Ottoman advance into the region.⁸² Furthermore, the Ottoman Army of Islam created by Enver Pasha planned to receive much of its manpower from local Tartar volunteers.⁸³

However, socialist and democratic thought influenced members of all three groups - Georgian, Armenian, as well as Tartar - and jointly they established the Transcaucasian Commissariat.⁸⁴ Its capital was Tiflis in Georgia. This short-lived government, with equal representation of the three ethnic groups, hoped to deter the Ottomans and refused to recognize the authority of the Bolshevik regime.⁸⁵ The more radical Bolsheviks sensed an opportunity to seize control. They consolidated their power amongst the oil workers in Baku under the charismatic leadership of Armenian communist Stepan Shaumian.⁸⁶

Baku was a microcosm of the greater Caucasus region. The city hugs the southern coast of the Aspheron peninsula that juts out into the Caspian Sea. Legend dictates the name Baku comes from the Persian phrase for “buffeted by winds.”⁸⁷ Its history has

⁸¹ Suny, 16.

⁸² Erickson, 182.

⁸³ Reynolds, *Shattering Empires*, 220.

⁸⁴ Leonid Mitrokhin, 14.

⁸⁵ Reynolds, *Shattering Empires*, 192.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁸⁷ Suny, 3.

certainly been that of a city tossed by fortune. Oil, and the desire for it, has long been central to Baku's identity. Zoroastrian fire worshippers built an ancient temple there with an eternal flame nourished by underground oil.⁸⁸ With the growth of the modern petroleum industry, Russians, Armenians, Persians, Jews, and others flocked to the traditionally Tartar city. In 1917, of the 110,000 workers in Baku, approximately 52 percent were Muslim, 23 percent were Russian, and 22 percent were Armenian.⁸⁹

Further south, the Kurds continued to fiercely guard their limited autonomy. They operated as irregular forces for the Ottomans and sought opportunities to gain advantage over other ethnic groups but did not welcome direct Ottoman control.⁹⁰ To the East, the Persians continued to chafe under the de facto control of the British. It was this nationalist discontent that Germany had tried to leverage earlier in the war.⁹¹ Persian nationalists, most closely associated with the Iranian Democrat Party, saw Germany as a natural ally. It was too geographically distant to pose a direct threat and was at war with the great powers that subjugated Persia.⁹² With the Russian collapse, armed movements began operating to rid Persia of foreign dominance.⁹³

⁸⁸ Steven LeVine, *The Oil and the Glory: The Pursuit of Empire and Fortune on the Caspian Sea* (New York: Random House, 2007), 5.

⁸⁹ Suny, 13.

⁹⁰ David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: Tauris, 2005), 105; Reynolds, *Shattering Empires*, 195.

⁹¹ Gibbons, 88-89.

⁹² Atabaki, 3.

⁹³ Hopkirk, *Like a Hidden Fire*, 301.

Summary

The outcome of World War I was unclear to the belligerents at the beginning of 1918. While men and material were being massed on the Western Front for a climactic struggle, the most significant changes occurred in the East. The revolution in Russia presented new opportunities to the Central Powers. Britain's need to defend the Suez Canal and secure its oil supply led it to conduct offensives against the Ottomans in Palestine and Mesopotamia. In 1917, the Ottomans suffered numerous defeats in the Middle East. The establishment of a new Turkic empire in the former Tsarist Russian states in the Caucasus could make up for those Ottoman losses. In addition, Germany desperately sought the natural resources that would allow them to continue fighting. The Russian Revolution unleashed conflicting social dynamics and gave newfound freedoms to ethnicities in the region. All these factors would influence the establishment of Dunsterforce.

CHAPTER 3

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF DUNSTERFORCE

There is a dry wind blowing through the East and the parched grasses wait the spark. And the wind is blowing towards the Indian border. Whence comes that wind, think you?

— John Buchan, *Greenmantle*

The political and military objectives of Dunsterforce

In the midst of the First World War, the best-selling novel *Greenmantle* thrilled British readers. The tale recounts the daring exploits of British intelligence officers stopping a German inspired plot for the Ottomans to advance against the Russians in the Caucasus. According to the plot, the Germans and Ottomans hoped to enflame the Muslim communities in Central Asia and British India. Published in 1916, over a year before the organization and dispatch of Dunsterforce, it perfectly captures long-held British fears.¹ Following an 1857 rebellion of Indian soldiers, British policymakers held a deep-seated anxiety for the security of their most prized colonial possession.² German and Ottoman plans to initiate a Muslim holy war against the Entente only seemed to confirm the worst of these fears.

¹ John Buchan, *Greenmantle* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1916), 17.

² Townshend, 24. As British Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon exclaimed, “As long as we rule India we are the greatest power in the world. If we lose it we shall drop straight away to a third rate power.” David Reynolds, *The Long Shadow: The legacies of the Great War in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Norton and Company, 2014), 90.

The Russian collapse destroyed the carefully constructed *cordon sanitaire* to block the Central Powers in the region.³ Reports of Enver Pasha's plans to conquer the Caucasus presented British policy makers, especially those trained for years on the "eastern question"⁴, with a nightmare scenario: British forces in the Middle East outflanked, the natural resources of the Caucasus at the disposal of the Central Powers, and India vulnerable to German-Ottoman inspired insurrection.⁵

Yet an Ottoman offensive in the Caucasus, no matter how great a perceived threat, joined a long list of dangers faced by Britain and her allies in 1917-1918. The bloody offensives at the Somme and Passchendaele had exhausted the British Army on the Western Front.⁶ The U-boat campaign and German air attacks put additional strain on a British home front numbed by endless casualty lists.⁷ In 1918, the Entente powers also

³ Sean Kelly, "How far West?: Lord Curzon's Transcaucasian (Mis)Adventure and the Defense of British India, 1918-1923," *The International History Review* 35, no. 2: 275.

⁴ Sinnreich, 124.

⁵ Fisher, 163. Nor should such a threat be completely discounted. In 1913, an observer wrote, "the feasibility of a military road to India through Russia and Persia has been many times declared. The route through Turkestan, across the Caspian and up the Russian rivers, was one of the commonest roads followed by invasion after invasion from Asia." Roland G. Usher, *Pan-Germanism* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1913), 200. A conventional military attack on India by the Central Powers was probably beyond their capabilities. However, their presence in Central Asia could have emboldened nationalist insurrection in the South Asian subcontinent.

⁶ Strachan, 255.

⁷ George H. Allen, *The Great War: The Wavering Balance of Forces* (Philadelphia, PA: Geoerge Barrie's Sons, 1919), 396.

needed to conserve their manpower for an expected German offensive in the West following the fall of Russia.⁸

In December 1917, the British and French met to discuss what actions, if any, should be taken towards the new Bolshevik government in Russia, as well as the disparate ethnic groups and any Russian forces that might be willing to continue fighting the Central Powers.⁹ An Anglo-French memorandum issued following that meeting specified that they should establish unofficial contacts with the Bolsheviks and others. It also highlighted the need to deny the Central Powers the grain and military supplies of the Ukraine and block any Ottoman attempt to seize the Caucasus and establish a Pan-Turkic movement in Central Asia. Furthermore, in a classified addendum to this general plan, the Allies divided the geographic responsibility with France taking the Ukraine and Britain the Caucasus.¹⁰

Thus, British policy makers sought alternatives to an additional commitment of land forces, which were in any case unavailable, to contain the Ottomans in the Caucasus.¹¹ An unwieldy trinity composed of the British cabinet in London, Middle East headquarters in Cairo, and the India Office formulated British policy in the Middle East.¹² However, it was the Eastern Committee - as well as its predecessor Persian

⁸ Palmer, 165.

⁹ Victor Margueritte, *Les Allies contre La Russie: Avant, Pendant et Après la Guerre Mondiale* (Paris: Andre Delpeuch, 1926), 252.

¹⁰ George F. Kennan, *Russia Leaves the War: Americans in Petrograd and the Bolshevik Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1956), 179.

¹¹ Buchan, 289.

¹² Ulrichsen, 21.

Committee - of the British war cabinet, and its chair Lord George Curzon, who were most adamant to block the Ottoman thrust into the Caucasus.¹³ Lord Curzon had previously served as the Viceroy in India. For British political and military leaders with experience in India, historical precedent existed for dispatching small forces, with knowledge of the region in which they were to operate, to accomplish ostensibly impossible missions.¹⁴

Hence, in a flurry of memorandums between government committees, a solution was devised¹⁵; the organization of a small task force composed of veteran officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) to organize, train, and direct the resistance of Christian Georgians and Armenians in the South Caucasus path of the Ottoman

¹³ It was the British Cabinet's Persian Committee, also chaired by Lord Curzon, which decided to dispatch a task force to Northwest Persia and the Caucasus. The Eastern Committee was actually formed in March 1918, after the deployment of Dunsterforce. The Eastern Committee assumed the responsibilities of the former Middle East, Russian, and Persian Committees. As an interagency board with a wide remit chaired by an aggressive cabinet member it is most closely associated with the British policy decisions that impacted Dunsterforce. See, CAB 24/45/5, Memorandum to the War Cabinet by Lord Curzon on the formation of the Eastern Committee. Kelly, 276.

¹⁴ For examples of such British colonial operations in the previous century see Bryon Farwell, *Queen Victoria's Little Wars* (New York: Norton, 1972); Charles Allen, *Soldier Sahibs: The daring Adventurers who tamed India's northwest Frontier* (London: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2001).

¹⁵ Interestingly, the United States played a role in the inception of the British concept. The American Consul in Tiflis, F. Willoughy Smith, passionately advocated providing financial assistance to the Caucasus people in order to enable them to resist the Central Powers. However, the United States was not at war with the Ottoman Empire and the U.S. Department of State correctly feared that such assistance would cause "sectionalism or disruption of Russia or civil war." The Department did forward Smith's concept to Colonel Edward House, President Wilson's representative in Paris, who shared the idea with "his British, French, and Italian colleagues." George F. Kennan, *Russia Leaves the War*, 171; Kazemzadeh, 79.

advance.¹⁶ This organization was originally designated the British Military Mission to the Caucasus. Its commander would also be the senior British representative in Tiflis, the city envisioned to be its headquarters.¹⁷ It would be an independent operation answering directly to the Commander of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS) in London.

This task force, ultimately dispatched to northwest Persia and the South Caucasus, would not be operating alone. Another mission under the command of Major General Wilfrid Malleon (MALMISS), deployed to Meshed, eastern Persia, in order to secure Central Asia east of the Caspian Sea should the Ottoman advance take Baku.¹⁸ Further afield, a small expedition under Colonel Frederick M. Bailey went to Kashgar, in what was then called Chinese Turkestan, to monitor the situation.¹⁹ These expeditions would be serving under the command of the British military headquarters in India.

Finally, and most importantly, a small British unit was already operating in Tiflis under Lieutenant (later full) Colonel G. D. Pike.²⁰ Originally sent to coordinate with the

¹⁶ PRO WO 106/983, British Military Mission to the Caucasus: Note on Preparations and Organizations dated 11 February, 1918.

¹⁷ Townshend, 419.

¹⁸ David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1989), 355-356.

¹⁹ Peter Hopkirk, *Setting the East Ablaze: Lenin's Dream of an empire in Asia* (New York: 1984), 7.

²⁰ Generaly Offley Shore commanded the British mission in Tiflis prior to Colonel Pike. Pike would be killed in Vladikavkaz, far forward of Dunsterforce in mysterious circumstances on August 15 1918. PRO WO 95/4960, Report from Major G. M. Goldsmith, acting British Military Agent, Army of Caucasus Front to the Director of Military Intelligence (DMI), London, 1 July 1919.

Tsarist Russian military command, it subsequently served as a source of intelligence on the situation in the region.²¹ Pike was originally appointed the Chief of Staff of the British Military mission to the Caucasus, although he would never link up with the rest of the force. When the Germans entered Tiflis at the behest of the Georgians, this team retreated further north into the Caucasus but continued to operate.

How well did the British government understand the situation in the Caucasus? In spite of a relatively developed intelligence and diplomatic network, the situation was much too fluid and confused for policymakers to fully grasp, hunched over pristine maps thousands of miles away. The ability of these ethnic groups to successfully resist an Ottoman military offensive was questionable. Nor did British policy makers fully comprehend the interests and objectives of the Bolsheviks or the other revolutionary organizations in the area that had sprung up in the wake of the Russian Empire's downfall. The British also did not understand the depth of the growing discord between the Ottomans and Germans, nor the strength of armed Persian nationalists astride the line of advance of any British task force sent to the Caucasus.

What was not understood or known could be overcome by the skill and savvy of the right men, or so thought the political and military leaders who conceived this plan to accomplish British political and military objectives in the region. According to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General William Robertson,

What was needed (in Persia and Trans-Caspia) was to dispatch to the *centres* of intrigue and disaffection a few Englishmen of the right type to give our version of the state of affairs, furnish them with money to pay handsomely for information

²¹ Plotke, 174.

and services rendered, and provide them with just sufficient escort to ensure their personal safety.²²

The strategic goals of the British in the region were listed in a document entitled “British Measures in Trans-Caucasus” dated 9 February 1918 as:

1. Protection of the Christian Armenians from the Turks.
2. Retention of as many Turkish troops as possible on the Caucasian front, in order to relieve pressure on Mesopotamia and Palestine; and
3. Checking the Pan-Islamic and Pan-Turanian propaganda, in order that it might not create unrest in Central Asia, Persia, Afghanistan, and India.²³

The operational objectives of what was officially the British Mission to the Caucasus would change many times during the course of the operation. British Prime Minister David Lloyd George disingenuously suggests in his memoirs that the force was originally designed to “carry out famine relief in North Persia and keep open the route between Baghdad and the Caspian” only later being tasked to defend Baku.²⁴ It is clear that the initial objectives of this task force were much more ambitious.

The task force was originally expected to proceed all the way to Tiflis, far beyond Baku, and assume command of the military mission already operating there in order to “reorganize broken units of Russian, Georgian, and Armenian soldiery, and restore the

²² Quoted in Townshend, 419.

²³ Colonel Richard A. Steel, “British Measures in Trans-Caucasus and Armenia” (9 February 1918) provided informally to the American Ambassador in London, National Archives, Department of State. George F. Kennan, 187. This document provided to the United States Government lists the protection of Christian Armenians first. While not necessarily misleading, this was most likely an attempt to garner American support as the United States was not interested in the defense of the British Empire.

²⁴ David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs: VI* (London: Ivor Nicholson and Watson, 1936), 3194.

battle-line against the Turkish invasion.”²⁵ Official documents state that the object of the mission was:

to organize, train, and eventually lead the Armenians, Georgians, and Tartars (those being the people of the Southern Caucasus) for the prevention of the spreading of German propaganda to Afghanistan and thence to India, the protection of the Baku Oil fields, the prevention of the Cotton Crop store at Krasnovodsk getting into German hands and to provide an additional force to operate against the Turks from the East, and to hold the Batoum-Tiflis-Baku-Krasnovodsk line to Afghanistan.²⁶

The objectives changed because of both the fluctuating situation and internal conflict between British leaders on what could realistically be accomplished with such a small force. For example, by the time the task force was truly operational, German troops had already landed in Tiflis and the Bolsheviks would not allow the British to enter Baku. As a result, the force was then tasked with only securing Northwest Persia. When the Bolshevik government in Baku fell and Britain again had the opportunity to deploy to the Caucasus, a fierce debate erupted amongst British leaders on the wisdom of such a move before finally authorizing the force to proceed to Baku.²⁷

²⁵ Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 8.

²⁶ Plotke, 226.

²⁷ Townshend, 426.

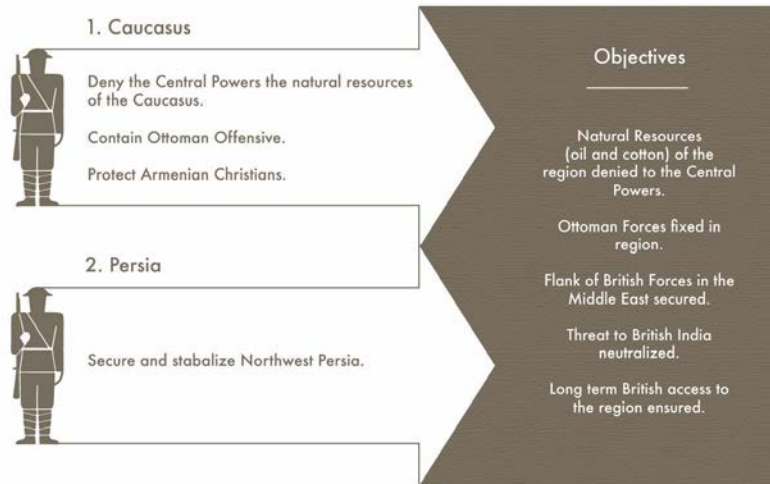


Figure 4. Objectives of Dunsterforce

Source: Created by Sven Hoogerheide, concept by author.

Opponents

Not all British decision makers supported a military campaign to Persia and the Caucasus. For many “westerners”, personified by the commander of British Forces in France, Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, such interventions far from the Western Front were dangerous distractions.²⁸ They believed all men and material should be concentrated against the enemy’s center of gravity, the German Army in the West.²⁹ Yet the independent power and influence of these “westerners” had been greatly curtailed

²⁸ Plotke, 43.

²⁹ Palmer, 74.

following the elections that made David Lloyd George Prime Minister in December 1916.³⁰ Lloyd George reasserted civilian control over the military and sought alternatives to the bloody battles of France by targeting the weak Ottoman Empire.³¹

More importantly, and dangerously, the new commander of the British troops in Mesopotamia, known as the Mesopotamian Expeditionary Force (MEF), believed a British military campaign in the Caucasus and Persia was “madness.”³² The conqueror of Baghdad, Lieutenant General Stanley Maude died of Cholera in November 1917. His replacement, cautious Lieutenant General William Marshall, opposed a British expedition to the Caucasus. This was undoubtedly shaped by his earlier personal experiences in the British defeat at Gallipoli in the Dardanelles and the disastrous surrender at Kut.³³

Marshall was justly concerned with the logistics necessary to sustain a force so far from its base of supply and skeptical of the Ottoman-German threat to India. For “bogies created by the enemy or by our own too lively imaginations are of frequent occurrence and apt to become a nuisance if encouraged.”³⁴ Yet the bitter tone of his memoirs suggests additional motives behind his disapproval. It is noteworthy that as originally envisioned, the British mission to the Caucasus would be an independent command outside of the control, but dependent on the support, of the MEF. Additionally, the British Cabinet did not solicit Marshall’s input before its formation. According to Marshall,

³⁰ Palmer, 73.

³¹ Neiberg, 286-287.

³² Marshall, 286.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 283.

Presumably, the idea of the Dunsterville mission and its objective emanated from ‘The Eastern Committee of the War Cabinet.’ I was not consulted in the matter and knew nothing of the political reasons which prompted its dispatch, but had the Eastern Committee done me the honor of asking for my opinion, I should certainly have advised against the whole project.³⁵

The MEF commander’s opposition significantly influenced the outcome of the campaign.

Long-term British policy interests in the region

The true goals of the British mission to the Caucasus have been a source of debate among historians. Numerous Soviet accounts written during the Cold War claim the expedition’s ulterior motives were to crush the communist revolution and secure Baku’s oil for the British Empire.³⁶ This is not surprising considering Allied interventions elsewhere in Russia following the revolution³⁷ and British intelligence efforts to overthrow the Bolshevik commune in Baku in order to enable the task force to enter the city.³⁸

In reality, British official documents make clear that they were truly attempting to block the advance of the Ottomans, deny the natural resources of the region to the Central Powers, and protect their Indian colony.³⁹ Furthermore, Britain initially feared the

³⁵ Marshall, 282.

³⁶ Mitrokhin, 11.

³⁷ In addition to the actions previously discussed, Allied forces deployed to North Russia and Siberia. Those operations are beyond the scope of this narrative but have influenced Soviet historical analysis of all Allied interventions in the former Tsarist Empire. See Occleshaw, and Margueritte.

³⁸ Hopkirk, *Like a Hidden Fire*, 311.

³⁹ PRO CAB 24/72/30, Memorandum to the Cabinet by the Secretary of State for India; George Kennan, “Reviewed Work: The British Intervention in Transcaspia, 1918-1919 By C. H. Ellis,” *Slavic Review* 23, no. 2 (June 1964): 348.

repercussions of directly targeting the Bolsheviks. According to the British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, “any overt step taken against the Bolsheviks might only strengthen their determination to make peace, and might be used to inflame anti-Allied feelings in Russia, and so defeat the very object we were aiming at.”⁴⁰

However, the British long-term interests in the region did include maintaining access to the significant oil reserves in Baku and Persia. In addition, British policy makers were beginning to formulate a plan to govern large tracts of the Middle East in order to secure India.⁴¹ Distaste for communism would color British interactions with the Bolsheviks throughout the operation. In the vacuum, British military commanders would take an increasingly anti-Bolshevik stance that would later become official policy.⁴²

The selection of Major General L.C. Dunsterville

On 22 December 1917, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff in London telegraphed the Commander in Chief of the British Army in India requesting:

It is of the utmost importance that no time should be lost in sending a suitable officer to the Caucasus, . . . Can you spare Brigadier General L.C. Dunsterville now commanding the Peshawar Infantry Brigade?⁴³

The selection of Lionel Charles Dunsterville as commander of the task force was an inspired choice. None of his previous assignments in World War I suggested he would

⁴⁰ George, 2565.

⁴¹ Kelly, 280.

⁴² Brock Millman, “The Problem with Generals: Military Observers and the Origins of the Intervention in Russia and Persia, 1917-18,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 33, no. 2 (April 1998): 291-320.

⁴³ Mitrokhin, 24.

be particularly suited for such a complex diplomatic and military command. Immediately after the initiation of hostilities in August 1914, while on leave in England, he had volunteered his services; but as Indian Army officers (in comparison with Regular British Army officers) were not seen as proficient, he was assigned to help manage the rail networks along the British lines of communication in France.⁴⁴ He had most recently been an infantry brigade commander on the Northwest Frontier of India fighting Pashtun tribesmen far from the most active theaters of the war.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ L. C. Dunsterville, *Stalky's Reminiscences* (London: Butler and Tanner, 1928), 242. The British Indian Army was a distinct organization from the Regular British Army. Its primary role was the defense of British India and the independent Indian princely states. At the same time, it was a significant source of manpower for British colonial operations in general and the First World War in particular. See Richard Holmes, *Sahib: The British Soldier in India 1750-1914* (New York: Harper, 2006).

⁴⁵ Artin H. Arslanian, "Dunsterville's Adventures: A Reappraisal," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 12, no. 2 (September 1980): 200; Townshend, 419.



Figure 5. Portrait of Major General L. C. Dunsterville

Source: Australian War Memorial Collection, ID: P00562.129 (Photo, 1918), accessed 20 February 2016, <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P00562.129>.

Nevertheless, Dunsterville was well matched for this, his penultimate assignment. He had graduated from the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst in 1884 but transferred from the Regular Army to the Indian Army in search of more active service, after which followed a military career on the Indian subcontinent with a deployment to China to suppress the Boxer Rebellion.⁴⁶ Most importantly, he had shown a particular aptitude for learning languages and spoke eight.⁴⁷ The British military had identified this linguistic ability and sent him to Russia earlier in his career to become fluent in Russian.⁴⁸ His

⁴⁶ Dunsterville, *Stalky's Reminiscences*, 57, 68.

⁴⁷ Dunsterville spoke French, German, Russian, Persian, Urdu, Punjabi, Pashtu, and Chinese. Bryan Perrett and Anthony Lord, *The Czar's British Squadron* (London: William Kimber, 1981), 163; Palmer, 195.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 145.

knowledge of Russian and his ability to act “both as soldier and as diplomat” was the reason he was selected to command the task force later named Dunsterforce, after its commander.⁴⁹

Interestingly, Dunsterville was also a minor celebrity to the British public. He had gone to school with the famous writer Rudyard Kipling. Dunsterville served as the inspiration for the title character *Stalky*, the charismatic leader of a group of rebellious boys at a tyrannical boarding school in Kipling’s novel *Stalky and Co.*⁵⁰ A reader of Dunsterville’s numerous own written works will note a thirst for adventure, a wry sense of self-deprecating humor, and an innate enjoyment of different cultures. A review of the memoirs of the men who served under his command highlights the deep loyalty he inspired in them.⁵¹ After veteran Australian Captain S.G. Savige received a briefing from Dunsterville, he knew, “we had a man of rare quality and stern determination to lead us, and whatever he would ask of us would be more than attempted.”⁵²

⁴⁹ PRO WO 106/983, British Military Mission to the Caucasus: Note on Preparations and Organizations dated February 11, 1918.

⁵⁰ Rudyard Kipling, *Stalky and Co.* (London: MacMillan, 1899).

⁵¹ Reginald Teague-Jones alias Ronald Sinclair, *The Spy who Disappeared: Diary of a Secret Mission to Russian Central Asia in 1918* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1990), 101; Ranald MacDonell, *And Nothing Long* (London: Constable, 1938), 267; A. Rawlinson, *Adventures in the Near East: 1918-1922* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1924), 57; M. H. Donohoe, *With the Persian Expedition* (London: Edward Arnold, 1919), 130-131; French, 96.

⁵² S. G. Savige, *Stalky’s Forlorn Hope* (Melbourne, Australia: Alexander McCubbin, 1920), 17.

The Task Organization of Dunsterforce

Dunsterforce was promoted to Major General and given command of a task force that at first existed in name only. The units had yet to be assembled and were being mobilized from across the different theaters of war.⁵³ According to a report on the preparation and organization of the task force, “the guiding principle in selection” of the officers and NCOs was “character.”⁵⁴

The British high command conceived of a handpicked light force that would substitute mass and firepower with skill and mobility. It was originally organized to consist only of 150 officers and 300 NCOs with five squadrons of eight armored cars each⁵⁵ and a significant amount of gold to sway the wavering groups it was meant to operate amongst.⁵⁶ Dunsterforce would be given a staff similar to that of a division.⁵⁷

Many of those selected were from the British Dominions of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa. Dunsterforce’s deputy commander Colonel (later

⁵³ Contingents were dispatched from India, Mesopotamia, South Persia, Egypt, East Africa, Salonika, Britain, and France. PRO WO 106/983, British Military Mission to the Caucasus: Note on Preparations and Organizations dated 11 February 1918.

⁵⁴ PRO WO 106/983, British Military Mission to the Caucasus: Note on Preparations and Organizations dated 11 February 1918.

⁵⁵ The Armored Car unit was originally envisioned to “consist of 40 combat vehicles, in five squadrons of eight cars, each with four two-car sections.” 16 of those cars were redirected to France to stem the Ludendorff German offensives. As a result, two squadrons were equipped as “motor machine-gun squadrons” using unarmored Ford trucks. It would be sometime before any of this unit arrived in the theater. Perrett and Lord, 164.

⁵⁶ Townshend, 419.

⁵⁷ PRO WO 106/983, British Military Mission to the Caucasus: Note on Preparations and Organizations dated 11 February 1918.

Brigadier General) J. J. Bryon had made the decision to recruit ‘colonials’ after witnessing their impressive performance during the Boer War.⁵⁸ In addition, by this stage of the war, the Dominion troops had developed a reputation as the shock troops of the British Army.⁵⁹

In January 1918, Byron traveled directly to the Western Front in France to speak to the commanders of the Australian, Canadian, New Zealand, and South African forces serving there because, “we well realize how difficult it is for you to spare good officers, and especially the kind of officers we want” for a “very important and difficult mission.”⁶⁰ These commanders subsequently solicited volunteers for “what may be a hazardous enterprise, requiring initiative, resource, and courage, and power of dealing with and managing men.”⁶¹ Those officers and NCOs selected from the Western Front were sent to London and given a stipend to purchase the appropriate equipment before departing.

Surprisingly, the assigned armored car unit had already fought in the planned area of operations. It was originally led by British Member of Parliament Oliver Locker Lampson and was an armored car unit of the Royal Naval Air Service; a result of First Sea Lord Winston Churchill’s interest in technological innovation.⁶² They had been

⁵⁸ Ford, 193.

⁵⁹ Neiberg, 237; Reynolds, *The Long Shadow*, 86.

⁶⁰ C. E. W. Bean, *Australian First World War Official Histories V*, 8th ed. (Canberra, Australia: Australian War Memorial, 1941), 729.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 730.

⁶² Perrett and Lord, 13, 19.

assigned earlier in the war to serve with the Russian Army on the Eastern Front. In 1916, they fought in the Caucasus and Northwest Persia, terrain they would return to with Dunsterforce.⁶³ In January 1918, following the Russian Revolution, they were reassigned from the Navy to the Army, and deployed to support Dunsterforce. Their new operational designation was Duncars.⁶⁴

In addition to Dominion and armored car troops, British officers were selected who had Russian or French language skills, intelligence training, or previous experience in the Caucasus region and elsewhere overseas.⁶⁵ The British likewise recruited a small contingent of “splendid” Russian and Armenian officers and other refugees from the Revolution.⁶⁶ The majority of Dunsterforce’s senior leadership and staff officers were from the British Indian Army, like Dunsterville himself. Cultural differences would lead to friction between some of these men and the Dominion troops.⁶⁷ All these elements would arrive in the theater of operations in small groups throughout the winter and early spring of 1918.

The task force was known as the “Hush-Hush Army” due to the secrecy surrounding its formation and objectives.⁶⁸ Officers were only briefed on their intended

⁶³ Ibid., 58.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 162-164.

⁶⁵ Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 10.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ John Weightman Warden, *The Diary of LTC John Weightman Warden* (Ottawa, Canada: Public Archives of Canada, 1918), 8.

⁶⁸ Ford, 192.

destination the day before their departure. NCOs had to wait until they reached the Persian Gulf. There, they joined similar groups from other theaters of the war.⁶⁹

However, this task organization would change. No matter how elite the forces assigned, Dunsterforce would require additional combat power. Grudgingly, the British command in Mesopotamia provided conventional forces to augment Dunsterforce. A squadron of cavalry from the 14th Hussars and three Rolls Royce armored cars of the 6th Light *Armoured* Motor Battery were sent first. Later, infantry from the Hampshire regiment, Second Gurkhas, and a small artillery contingent would play a critical role in the operations of Dunsterforce. Finally, an entire brigade, the 39th, would be dispatched to support Dunsterforce.

In addition, the 1st Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) Wireless Signal Squadron was assigned to establish a communication network. As the campaign developed, a small air and naval contingent extended the reconnaissance ability and reach of the expedition. The Royal Navy, under the command of Captain David Norris, retrofitted existing vessels to serve as troop and command ships becoming the first members of the British Navy to operate in the Caspian Sea.⁷⁰

British Government Support

Dunsterforce would not have to operate in a complete void. Although British combat forces would be far behind in Mesopotamia and linked only by a tortuous line of communication across imposing snow-covered mountain ranges, other British groups

⁶⁹ Bean, 731.

⁷⁰ David Norris, "Caspian Naval Expedition 1918-1919," *The Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society* 10, no. 3, (1923): 216-240.

were already operating in Persia. Incredibly, British consular officials were operating in all the major Persian cities and into the Caucasus.⁷¹ These consulates would help shape the operating environment before Dunsterforce's arrival and later act as hubs from which Dunsterforce could both operate and communicate back to British policy makers.

The Imperial Bank of Persia was a British-run organization with branches in many cities of Persia.⁷² In a seamless blend of British economic penetration benefiting military operations, the bank and its personnel would place themselves at the disposal of Dunsterforce. The significant financial needs of Dunsterforce were met, in most cases, with funds made available by the Imperial Bank of Persia.

In addition, British national level intelligence organizations would support Dunsterforce. The British Directorate of Military Intelligence was reorganized in 1916 and for a short time in 1918, intelligence and operations were combined into a single organization (MIO) responsible for all matters "concerning Russia, Rumania, Siberia, Central Asia, Caucasus, Persia and Afghanistan."⁷³ MIO and its commander Colonel Richard A. Steele helped develop the original concept for Dunsterforce.⁷⁴ Steele had also arranged the escape of Tsarist cryptographers and with their help the British were able to

⁷¹ Ford, 443.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Plotke, 21.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 14. British Intelligence Officer Richard Meinertzhagen also claims credit for developing the objectives of Dunsterforce. According to him, "I was largely responsible for insisting on our getting a footing on the Caspian, for the first ill-fated occupation of Baku and the removal of Dunsterforce." R. Meinertzhagen, *Army Diary 1899-1926*, (Edinburgh, Scotland: Over and Boyd, 1960), 242.

decode Bolshevik communications.⁷⁵ Dunsterforce's geographic area of operations enabled the establishment of critical additional listening posts.

Furthermore, MIO provided specially trained intelligence officers who would report to Dunsterforce but in many cases act far forward of the main area of operations of the task force. Most of these officers had significant language, espionage, and sabotage skills, but not all. A Lieutenant Ward was dispatched across the globe to blow up a bridge along the Central Caspian Railway in order to block the Ottoman advance. Yet he had neither language nor explosive training and there was no major bridge to be a target.⁷⁶

Summary

It is clear that the political and military objectives assigned to such a small ad-hoc task force were considerable, regardless of the other elements of British national power available. Dunsterville understood those challenges. Unlike his later memoirs, his diary at the time highlights his personal doubts and awareness of the significance and uncertainty of the challenges his organization would face. On 25 January 1918, he wrote:

I wonder if anyone will ever realize what a forlorn hope my mission is? I am proud and glad to have it and I think I can accomplish what I am told to, but that thought is based only on my optimism and not at all on calculation. If I were appreciating the situation for another man, I should say, "can't be done", but I can never say that for myself. I agree with the Government that it is worth trying and the loss of a few lives etc., is a trifle compared with what may be gained. I am up against a hostile-neutral, almost anarchical Persia and a possible hostile reception from our own friends, the Russians. The Turks at Kifri are within 50 miles of my road at the start, and one aeroplane, if it spots us, gets the lot as we cannot defend ourselves from the sky. We pass through 600 miles of barren, cold

⁷⁵ Plotke, 26.

⁷⁶ Teague-Jones, 27, 35, 79.

country, between 5000 and 7000 feet, and no supplies, and through Kurds all the time who are the same sort of independent robbers that the Afridis⁷⁷ are.⁷⁸

Strategic necessity led British policy makers to conceive a small task force of handpicked troops for a complex political and military mission. Yet the opposition of the British commander in Baghdad would hinder the successful execution of the operation. Foremost amongst the British leader's criteria for the mission was the selection of individuals with the right human qualities. What could be achieved depended on both the leader and men selected and the interplay of numerous variables, many beyond the control of Britain.

⁷⁷ A Pashtun tribe living today in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

⁷⁸ L. C. Dunsterville, *The Diaries of General Lionel Dunsterville 1911-1922*, 25 January 1918.

CHAPTER 4

THE CAUCASIAN WHIRLPOOL

As I began to regain my composure, I was filled with wild regrets at the prospect of no longer taking a hand in what seemed to me the making of history and wildly exciting game of occupying the Caucasus and creating a belt of states from the Black Sea to the Pamirs. In those days such undreamt-of things were materializing. The world was in flux and everything was possible.¹

— Lieutenant-Colonel Edward Noel, *A Prisoner Among the Jungali Bolsheviks*

Initial Moves

On 18 January 1918, General Dunsterville arrived in Baghdad. He reported to the British military headquarters and received briefings on the situation in his future area of operations. He also found himself the single representative of his force. His troops, mobilized from different fronts in the war, had yet to arrive. Dunsterville quickly began to realize how daunting the mission truly was. Before arriving in the Caucasus, Dunsterforce would have to navigate Kurdish hostility, questionable Persian neutrality, revolutionary Russians, winter storms, impassable roads, as well as limited supplies of food and fuel.²

Dunsterville wrote in his diary on 23 January:

My brain is full of men and horses, guns, rifles, equipment, ammunition, supplies, petrol, motor-cars, *aeroplanes*, clothing, cold, snow, marches, languages, tribes, politics, information and *rumours*, spies, pro and anti, finance, routes, tactics, strategy, geography, history.³

¹ Edward Noel, “A Prisoner Among the Jungali Bolsheviks,” in *Escape*, ed. H. C. Armstrong (New York: Robert M. McBride and Company, 1933), 32.

² Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 13.

³ Dunsterville, *The Diaries of General Lionel Dunsterville*, 25 January 1918.

As soon as possible Dunsterville dispatched scouts. Two officers, Major Walter Barttelot of the Coldstream Guards and Captain G. Goldsmith from British intelligence, arrived in Baghdad. Dunsterville ordered both men to precede the main body, assess the conditions of the road, and ensure fuel supplies were available along the route.⁴

By 27 January, enough officers and men had arrived to allow the impatient Dunsterville to begin. Time was of the essence. Russian forces were melting away and conditions were in flux. Dunsterville hoped to slip through the chaos to the port of Enzeli in Persia in order to immediately board ships for onward travel to the Caucasus.⁵ With 12 officers, 2 NCOs, and 41 soldiers acting as drivers they set off from Baghdad in a convoy of 40 Ford trucks and one armored car.⁶

The convoy proceeded relatively painlessly through Eastern Diyala province. After passing through the forward line of British troops and entering the Zagros Mountains that mark the border area between Mesopotamia and Persia they began to face increasing difficulties.⁷ The roads were horrendous, the passes were at altitudes between 5,000 and 8,000 feet, and they faced blinding winter snowstorms.⁸ Progress slowed to a crawl as the vehicles had to be pushed, pulled, dragged, and dug out by hand across the

⁴ Plotke, 171.

⁵ Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 15.

⁶ Townshend, 420.

⁷ Ford, 190.

⁸ Ibid.

forbidding terrain. The atrocious weather did provide an unforeseen benefit as it drove away the Kurdish bandits that usually molested travelers along this section of the road.⁹

Upon entering Persia, Dunsterville and his men witnessed evidence of the immense chaos and suffering that stalked the region. Undisciplined mobs of Russian soldiers clogged the road, retreating in disorder in order to claim the free land they believed the Bolsheviks' rise to power promised them.¹⁰ Meanwhile, famine was ravaging the Persian population. The convoy encountered dead and dying civilians along the road and starving inhabitants in the villages through which they passed.¹¹

Furthermore, the breakdown of Russian authority in northern Persia enabled a Persian nationalist organization, known as the "Jangalis", to control the densely forested and canalized terrain that covered the approaches to the Caspian Sea. This insurgent group was hostile to the British and sympathetic to the Bolsheviks.¹² Mirza Kuchik Khan led the Jangalis, an opponent the British grudgingly respected as "a man of character and personality and a strong nationalist."¹³ The Jangali force was estimated to consist of roughly 5,000 armed men who intimately knew the wooded terrain. Earlier in the war,

⁹ Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 19.

¹⁰ MacDonnell, 179.

¹¹ Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 108.

¹² Pezhmann Dailami, "The Bolsheviks and the Jangali Revolutionary Movement, 1915-1920," *Cahiers du Monde Russe et Sovietique* 31, no. 1 (January–March 1990): 47.

¹³ Noel, 30.

four military expeditions, two Russian and two Persian, had failed to defeat the Jangalis.¹⁴

Dunsterforce hoped to surprise the Jangalis by moving quickly through the terrain they controlled before they had the opportunity to organize resistance. He placed his armored car in the lead, and prepared the convoy for battle but the Jangalis did not attack.¹⁵ Dunsterforce's luck ended at the port of Enzeli, gateway to the Caucasus. A Bolshevik committee of Russian soldiers controlled the city and refused to allow the British expedition to proceed.¹⁶

Before dawn on 20 February 1918, while the committee waited for instructions on what they should do to the small British force, Dunsterforce slipped out of Enzeli and withdrew to the city of Hamadan, roughly half way between the Caspian Sea and Mesopotamia.¹⁷ They narrowly escaped a detachment of Red Guards dispatched from Baku to arrest the British troops.¹⁸ Dunsterforce had failed to reach its intended area of operations in the Caucasus. Its arrival in Enzeli would be the high water mark of this initial phase of the campaign. Subsequent phases would require more deliberate planning. It is in these phases that one can discern the lines of operation Dunsterforce chose to accomplish his objectives. Simultaneously, major events were unfolding in the Caucasus.

¹⁴ Moberly, 269.

¹⁵ Dunsterforce, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 35.

¹⁶ PRO AIR 20/662, Proceedings which took place at Bolshevik Revolutionary Committee on the occasion of the G.O.C's visit to Committee Headquarters, date 18 February 1918.

¹⁷ Dunsterforce, *The Diaries of General Lionel Dunsterforce*, 20 February 1918.

¹⁸ Townshend, 420.

Brest Litovsk - Carving up the Prize

At Brest Litovsk, the Central Powers and Bolsheviks engaged in diplomatic gamesmanship over the future of the East. The negotiating powers sought to either maximize their gains or limit their losses. Each side cleverly attempted to trap their opponents in their own rhetoric. The Bolsheviks' stated position was that there should be peace without annexations or indemnities and the right of national self-determination. This appeared to guarantee the Ottomans a return to the 1914 borders, allowing them to regain land lost to Russia during the war. It also encouraged them to seek the return of those provinces in the Caucasus, Kars, Ardahan, and Batumi, lost to Russia in 1878.¹⁹

Still, the Ottomans were junior partners in the Central Power alliance and peace without annexations would imperil Imperial Germany's desire to retain control of Eastern Europe. As a result, all sides at Brest-Litovsk would attempt to use nationalist aspirations to achieve their aims.²⁰ Germany espoused Polish, Lithuanian, and Ukrainian nationalism in order to consolidate their gains.

The Ottomans duly produced a "Caucasus Committee" to lobby for the return of Muslim lands in Russia to the Ottoman Empire. On 13 January, the Bolsheviks countered with a decree entitled "On Armenia", signed by Lenin and "Commissar for Nationalities" Joseph Stalin, recognizing the right of Armenians to self-determination and for Armenian refugees to return to their homeland. It also dictated the creation of an Armenian militia

¹⁹ This area was also known to the Ottomans as Elviye-i-Sealase or three provinces. Reynolds, *Shattering Empires*, 172.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 178.

and assigned ethnic Armenian Stepan Shaumian to act as a commissar for a Soviet of People's deputies in the Caucasus.²¹

The Bolshevik delegation's diplomatic grandstanding and stalling tactics enraged the Germans. The negotiations ceased and the Germans resumed their military advance towards Russia's capital, Petrograd. On 12 February, 1918, in conjunction with this offensive, the Ottomans also began advancing into the Russian occupied Caucasus. This and the coalescing of anti-Bolshevik Russian forces led Lenin to decide to sign a peace treaty regardless of the terms.²² On 3 March 1918, the Brest-Litovsk treaty ceded the Caucasian provinces of Kars, Ardahan, and Batumi to the Ottomans.²³ In the short term, Ludendorff's desire to punish the Bolsheviks overrode the German Foreign Ministry's belief that an Ottoman foothold in the Caucasus would endanger future German plans to exploit the region.²⁴ Germany would regret this decision.

Sudden independence-The people of Caucasus unmoored

The collapse of Tsarist Russian authority in the Caucasus had thrown the region into chaos. Political and ethnic groups, and combinations of the two, jockeyed for advantage. Outside of Baku, the most powerful socialist political group in the Caucasus was the Mensheviks. They believed that Russia was not yet ready for a true socialist

²¹ Reynolds, *Shattering Empires*, 179.

²² *Ibid.*, 184.

²³ John. W. Wheeler-Bennett, *Brest-Litovsk: The Forgotten Peace March 1918* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1938), 272.

²⁴ Reynolds, *Shattering Empires*, 184.

revolution and therefore advocated cooperation and the continued prosecution of the war.²⁵

The Socialist Revolutionaries bridged the gap between Mensheviks and Bolsheviks. Although ideologically socialist, their patriotic outlook attracted Russian loyalists, the most important of whom were the sailors of the Caspian Fleet. The Russian merchant and naval fleets in the Caspian Sea, led by a sailors' union, were a crucial independent base of power.²⁶ Whoever was able to ally with this group controlled the sea lines of communication in the Caspian.

The Armenians, on the other hand, had long been controlled by a secretive organization called the Dashnaktsutiun. This organization and its adherents, known as Dashnaks, were socialist in outlook but primarily dedicated to freeing the Armenian people from both Ottoman and Russian domination.²⁷ In their struggle, they conducted numerous acts of sabotage and terror that only increased the enmity between them and their opponents-usually Muslims.²⁸ The Dashnaks correctly feared that revolution and chaos would fatally weaken the Russian war effort against the Ottomans.²⁹

The strongest Muslim political group was the Musavat, a Tartar/Azeri nationalist party with pan-Islamic aspirations. Its official stated aims were "1. The unity of all Muslim peoples without regard to nationality or sect." and "2. Restoration of the

²⁵ Kazemzadeh, 37.

²⁶ Suny, 83.

²⁷ Ibid., 9.

²⁸ Ibid., 19.

²⁹ Ibid., 43.

independence of all Muslim nations.”³⁰ The Musavatists welcomed the revolution’s promise of greater autonomy but warily observed their Armenian rivals. To hedge against this threat they made a tactical and temporary alliance with the Bolsheviks in Baku.

Dunsterforce would have to navigate amongst this human terrain. Although in many ways opposing ideologies, the Armenians and Social Revolutionaries’ interests temporarily aligned with that of Dunsterforce. In the confused political situation, groups across the political spectrum made alliances of convenience to further their aims and ensure their survival.

³⁰ Kazemzadeh, 21.

Political Spectrum of Groups in Dunsterforce's Area of Operation

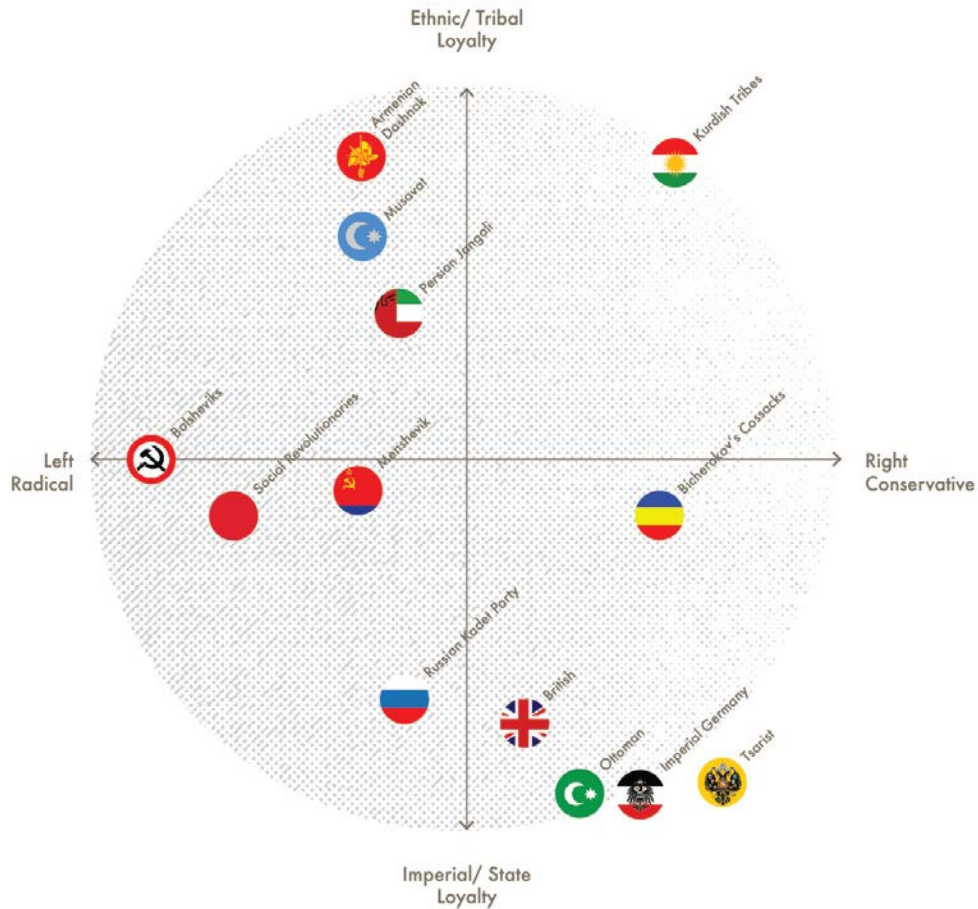


Figure 6. Political Spectrum of Groups in Dunsterforce's Area of Operation

Source: Created by Sven Hoogerheide, concept by author.

The November 1917 Bolshevik coup had severed the remaining links between the Caucasus and Russia. Outrage at this act, and the Bolsheviks' later dismissal of the popularly elected Russian Constituent Assembly, led the region to declare an autonomous

local government called the Transcaucasian Commissariat.³¹ However, within Baku itself, a Soviet led by the Armenian communist Stephan Shaumian revolted against the new government and swore their allegiance to the Bolsheviks.³²

For the creators of the Commissariat, the leap into de-facto independence was taken with trepidation. The Georgian Menshevik leader, Noi Jordania, bemoaned,

Now a Misfortune has befallen us. The connection with Russia has been broken and Transcaucasia has been left alone. We have to stand on our own feet and either help ourselves or perish through anarchy.³³

Unfortunately, for the inhabitants of the Caucasus, the slide into anarchy had already begun and would accelerate with dire consequences.

Ethnic Bloodletting

As Russian soldiers streamed home from the Caucasian front, little remained to block the Ottomans. An Armenian Corps, a Georgian force, a smattering of Russian volunteers, as well as a division of Greeks and local Tartar tribesmen formed to defend the Caucasus.³⁴ Of these, only the Armenians, driven by fear and ancient hatreds, were fully committed to fighting the Ottomans. British funds to support these troops, funneled

³¹ Kazemzadeh, 57.

³² Mitrokhin, 14.

³³ Kazemzadeh, 55.

³⁴ Larcher, 414. On 1 January 1918, the Armenian Corps consisted of two rifle divisions, three brigades of Armenian volunteers, a cavalry brigade, and some battalions of militia. The entire Armenian Corps did not exceed 20,000 troops. The Georgian force was no greater than 10,000 men. The Greek, Russian, and Tartar volunteers were not as sizeable. Although well supplied in machine guns from departing Russians they did not have enough trained artillery specialists. The combined force faced an initial Ottoman force from the Third Army that had between 45,000 and 50,000 effectives with 160 artillery guns. Allen and Muratoff, 458; MacDonell, 183.

through the Russian command in the Caucasus, were first paid to the Armenian troops. This decision greatly undermined Dunsterforce's ability to forge a unified resistance against the Ottomans. It exacerbated growing ethnic tensions and the Tartar force left the field in protest.³⁵

In addition, Kurdish irregulars targeted weak and dispersed Armenian detachments. Small unit engagements between Armenians and Kurds or Tartars grew in frequency and intensity. Furthermore, Armenians and disbanded Russian soldiers committed atrocities against Tartar villages in their path.³⁶ The resulting animosity accelerated the Tartar communities' drift towards the Ottomans. Armed Tartar bands were soon operating throughout the Caucasus, some with Ottoman officers as advisors.³⁷ They disarmed retreating Russian troops, harassed the lines of communication between Baku and Tiflis, and declared independent Muslim governments in different rural areas of the Caucasus.³⁸

Such ethnic conflict came to a head in Baku. The Musavatist Tartars in Baku felt uneasy in their alliance with the Bolsheviks, the majority of whose troops were Armenians. They invited members of the Savage Division to the city. Known for its ferocity in battle, the Savage Division was an old Tsarist unit recruited from Muslim tribes in the Caucasus.³⁹ Their arrival kindled Bolshevik, Armenian, and others' fears of

³⁵ MacDonell, 184.

³⁶ Allen and Muratoff, 458.

³⁷ MacDonell, 189.

³⁸ Kazemzadeh, 117.

³⁹ MacDonell, 198.

the loyalty of the Tartar population in the city. This ignited a brutal suppression of the Tartars.⁴⁰ In March 1918, the Caspian fleet, Bolsheviks, and Armenians allied to attack all Muslims in the city. For four days, battle raged throughout the city between the opposing forces.⁴¹ By the fifth day, a witness remembered, “not a single *Moslem* of any importance was left in the town.”⁴² These actions consolidated Bolshevik control of the city in a government called the Baku Commune.⁴³

The Ottomans Advance

Reports of atrocities against the Tartar population were used by the Ottomans to justify their advance beyond that conceded at Brest-Litovsk.⁴⁴ On 11 May 1918, in negotiations with the Transcaucasian Commissariat, the Ottomans demanded the occupation of additional regions, the transfer of control of the railway line into North Persia, and the use of all Transcaucasian railways so long as the war continued against Britain.⁴⁵ It appeared that only the weak Commissariat stood in the way of Enver Pasha’s

⁴⁰ Reynolds, *Shattering Empires*, 200.

⁴¹ Essad Bey, *Blood and Oil in the Orient: My Childhood in Baku and my hair-raising escape through the Caucasus*, 2nd ed. (London: Grayson and Grayson, 2008), 76.

⁴² MacDonell, 207.

⁴³ Mitrokhin, 17.

⁴⁴ Suny, 261-262.

⁴⁵ Allen and Muratoff, 467.

pan-Turkic dreams.⁴⁶ The Ottoman Empire's growing ambitions alarmed Germany which needed unfettered access to the natural resources in the region.⁴⁷

While negotiations continued, the Ottoman military offensive drove relentlessly forward. In a three-pronged advance, a corps drove north along the Black Sea coast, while two other corps moved north and east further into the interior.⁴⁸ The Armenians fought desperate rear guard actions as the Christian inhabitants fled before the Ottoman advance.⁴⁹

The impending Ottoman threat finally snapped the thin bonds that had united the people of the Caucasus. Tartar delegates of the Transcaucasian negotiating team secretly encouraged the Ottomans to seize Baku.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, the Georgians had begun conspiring with Germany who did not want the Ottomans to completely control the resources of the region.⁵¹

On 26 May 1918, the Transcaucasian Commissariat dissolved and Georgia proclaimed her independence.⁵² Two days later, Georgia and Germany signed an agreement giving Germany access to Georgian railways and stipulating that all railroad

⁴⁶ Allen and Muratoff, 468.

⁴⁷ Erickson, 186.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Kazemzadeh, 116.

⁵⁰ Reynolds, *Shattering Empires*, 200.

⁵¹ Buchan, *A History of the Great War*, 299.

⁵² Kazemzadeh, 120.

stations be occupied by German troops.⁵³ Georgia's deft diplomatic maneuver saved it from the Ottoman onslaught. German and Ottoman forces would exchange fire before the Ottomans conceded and pivoted east towards Baku and Persia.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, Germany sought an agreement with the Bolsheviks to access the oil of Baku in return for protecting the city from the Ottomans.⁵⁵

Azerbaijan and Armenia followed suit and declared their own independence. Yet it was Armenia, now alone, that faced the wrath of the Ottomans. On 4 June 1918 the country signed a peace treaty with the Ottomans that resulted in the loss of significant portions of her territory and handed the Ottomans complete control of the important rail network to Persia. The Tartars of Azerbaijan and the Ottomans now together focused on seizing Baku.⁵⁶

Shaping the Caucasus

While the main element of Dunsterforce was blocked in Persia, individual British military, intelligence, and diplomatic officers infiltrated the Caucasus to shape the outcome of the campaign. They would sabotage the Central Power's logistics, attempt to develop initial local resistance to the Ottomans, and assess the political situation in order to enable the arrival of the rest of the force. According to one such officer, Ranald MacDonell, these men's duties "were to prepare, devise, or create a situation which

⁵³ Kazemzadeh, 123.

⁵⁴ Erickson, 187.

⁵⁵ Reynolds, *Shattering Empires*, 231.

⁵⁶ Kazemzadeh, 127.

would enable General Dunsterville and his force to take charge.⁵⁷” Examples of the actions of some of these men illuminate the role they played in Dunsterforce’s campaign.

One such man was Captain Goldsmith. British military intelligence assigned Captain Goldsmith to “act as a military advisor . . . in the organization of regular Kurdish and Turkish Armenian forces for the purpose of raiding and destroying the Turkish lines of communication between *Diarbekr*⁵⁸ and Mosul.”⁵⁹ They subsequently placed him under the command of Dunsterville as an intelligence officer.⁶⁰

As noted, Dunsterville had dispatched Goldsmith to precede the main element. Unknown to Dunsterville, it was a result of Goldsmith’s negotiations with the Jangalis that they did not attack the main convoy. However, the Jangalis demanded in return that the British force not remain on Persian soil.⁶¹ Goldsmith was able to reach Baku and arranged for the North Caucasian Shipping Company to move Dunsterforce across the Caspian Sea only to discover that the Bolsheviks in Enzeli would not allow them to proceed.⁶²

⁵⁷ MacDonnell, 205.

⁵⁸ The modern western spelling of this city in the Kurdish region of Turkey is Diyarbakir.

⁵⁹ PRO WO 95/4960, Report from Major G. M. Goldsmith, acting British Military Agent, Army of Caucasus Front to the Director of Military Intelligence (DMI), London, 1 July 1919.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

On 18 February, Dunsterville told Goldsmith that the main party's arrival in the Caucasus would be delayed and instructed him to proceed onward to Tiflis and report to Colonel Pike. Chaos reigned along the route as Tartars attempted to disarm retreating Russian troops. In Tiflis, Pike ordered Goldsmith to the famous fortress city of Erzerum, then withstanding the Ottoman offensive. He arrived just in time to witness the Russian and Armenian defense collapse. Goldsmith helped evacuate 4,000 Armenian women and children and before the city fell, Goldsmith used explosives to destroy a tire factory and deny this equipment to the advancing Ottomans.⁶³

Back in Tiflis, Pike and Goldsmith tried to convince the newly independent Georgian republic to resist the Central Powers in the region. The multifarious negotiations involved the British and American consuls, the French military representative, and the offer of large sums of money. Nonetheless, Goldsmith discovered that the Georgians were already negotiating with the Germans through the Swiss Consulate.⁶⁴ The Germans landed forces in Georgia in competition with their Ottoman allies. As a result, on 3 May 1918, the small British detachment retreated north to Vladikavkas where Colonel Pike was later killed by Bolsheviks.⁶⁵ Before retreating, Goldsmith infiltrated the Tiflis wireless station allowing the British to intercept German

⁶³ PRO WO 95/4960, Goldsmith to DMI, London, 1 July 1919.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Moberly, 299. After Pike was killed, Goldsmith would command the remnants of this British mission. In October 1918, they were imprisoned by the Bolsheviks and released in July 1919. PRO WO/95/4960, Goldsmith to DMI, London, 1 July 1919.

and Turkish communications and correspond intermittently with British command in Baghdad.⁶⁶

The role played by Ranald MacDonell is perhaps the best example of the uniquely British fusion of economic, diplomatic, and military power. MacDonell had been assigned by his company to work in the Baku oil fields before the war.⁶⁷ After some years, he took on additional responsibility as the British Vice Consul. In both capacities, he made inroads in the local community and met most of the future political leaders in the city.

When the Russian Revolution brought turmoil to the region, MacDonell offered his services to the British Army and was given a major's commission.⁶⁸ He was ordered to support the British mission in Tiflis and Dunsterforce. In the earliest phases of the campaign, MacDonell served as a courier between Tiflis and Baku. He smuggled out numerous Russian officials fleeing the revolution and smuggled in funds "to be distributed among those who said they preferred killing Turks."⁶⁹

Another such officer was Captain Edward Noel. He previously served in Persia countering German intelligence operations. MacDonell described Noel as:

one of the bravest persons I ever met-that is, if a complete lack of any fear of consequences and the absence of any appreciation of what is known as personal

⁶⁶ PRO WO 95/4960, Goldsmith to DMI, London, 1 July 1919; Bulent Gokay, "The Illicit Adventures of Rawlinson: British Intelligence in the Final Phase of the Ottoman Empire" *Turkish Yearbook* vol. 23, 1993.

⁶⁷ MacDonnell, 82.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

safety constitutes bravery. The alarming thing about Noel was that he so easily instilled these qualities into others.⁷⁰

In February 1918, Noel was ordered from Teheran to Tiflis with “some hundredweights of rubles in bags” in support of Dunsterforce.⁷¹ Noel linked up with MacDonell in Baku. Together they hid the large amount of funds throughout the train that MacDonell used to move between Baku and Tiflis. Local Tartar forces allied themselves with the Ottomans and stopped the train in the city of Elizavetpol.⁷² The Tartar leader and his Ottoman military advisor accused Noel and MacDonell of supporting the Armenians in a burgeoning ethnic civil war that had erupted in the power vacuum. A dangerous game of bluff ensued where Noel dared the Tartars to inspect the diplomatic property of a country with which they were not yet officially at war. Noel and MacDonell were detained for two days until the Tartars finally allowed them to continue, their hidden funds undiscovered.⁷³

Upon arrival in Tiflis, Noel discovered that the Tartars were disarming retreating Russian soldiers and had completely cut the railway line with Baku. However, Noel and MacDonell needed to return to Baku. In order to shield themselves from Tartar roadblocks and irregular forces, they closely followed a large Russian force going home that refused to be disarmed.

⁷⁰ MacDonnell, 185.

⁷¹ Noel, 28.

⁷² Also known as Ganja.

⁷³ MacDonnell, 189.

In Baku, Noel tried to “find anyone who was prepared to go on fighting the Turks.” It was:

pure melodrama; midnight meetings, secret rendezvous, plots, and desperate schemes to buy gunboats and aeroplanes and seize the town. All round us was unorganized demobilization, famine.⁷⁴

Desperate to confer directly with Dunsterville, Noel traveled back to Persia. On 18 March, in the port city of Enzeli, the Jangalis captured Noel.⁷⁵ He later attempted a daring, but unsuccessful, escape.⁷⁶ Noel’s imprisonment added a further complication to Dunsterville’s efforts to neutralize the Jangali threat.

Summary

Dunsterville’s attempt to move his initial force quickly to the Caucasus failed. The speed and initiative of the small convoy allowed it to reach the Caspian Sea before its opponents could intercept it. However, its large signature and limited firepower left it vulnerable to the various groups who opposed its presence in the region. Had this initial force been able to enter the Caucasus, it is unlikely that the majority of the officers and NCOs of Dunsterforce who had yet to arrive in the theater would have been able to follow it.

On the other hand, individual well-trained British officers with excellent language skills were able to infiltrate the Caucasus. At great personal risk and in the absence of a larger force, they attempted to shape a chaotic operational environment. Their results

⁷⁴ Noel, 32.

⁷⁵ Moberly, 289.

⁷⁶ Noel, 41.

were mixed and in the case of Noel's capture, they added a complication to Dunsterville's planning. However, the connections they developed and their presence would enable Dunsterforce's later operations in the Caucasus.

Thus, while Dunsterville's main force would help secure Northern Persia, other British officers would shape the Caucasus area of operations. These officers sought opportunities to slow the Ottoman advance, gather intelligence, and identify local allies to resist the Central Powers. Alone, they were unable to dramatically change the course of events.

Yet the chaos resulting from the Russian Revolution provided both opportunities and impediments to these men's efforts. It is hard to imagine that British officers could have been able to operate so freely in a more stable environment. On the other hand, the shifting kaleidoscope of power meant that few groups were willing to ally themselves with a distant British force against the present Ottoman threat. However, as the Ottomans continued to advance, the connections made by these British officers would influence those groups that felt the most threatened to seek British aid.

CHAPTER 5

PERSIA SMALL FISH IN A TURBULENT SEA

In recording the operations of the 14th (King's) Hussars in Persia during the last year of the Great War, there is considerable difficulty in making the story either comprehensible or connected. The military and political reasons which necessitated the expedition were only vaguely understood at the time, nor were they clearly explained subsequently in published *despatches*. During most of this period the Squadrons were separated by some hundreds of miles of mountainous, roadless country.⁷⁷

— Historical Record of the 14th (King's) Hussars 1900-1922

North Persia Stability

Dunsterforce's initial foray into North Persia highlighted to its commander the dire security situation in the region. During Dunsterville's advance, he had stopped at the British consulates along his route and conferred with those diplomatic, military, and intelligence officers present. They stressed the volatility and vulnerability in the area.⁷⁸

Ottoman forces threatened northwest Persia and the Russians were in complete disarray.⁷⁹ In addition, the Persians were deeply hostile to the presence of Allied forces on their sovereign soil and famine was ravaging the population.⁸⁰ Furthermore, agents of the Central Powers were operating in Persia to destabilize the country. Kuchik Khan's Jangali troops were reported to be led by a German officer and trained by Austrian

⁷⁷ J. Gilbert Browne and E. J. Bridges, *Historical Record of the 14th (King's) Hussars: 1900-1922, Vol. II* (London: The Royal United Service Institution, 1932), 432.

⁷⁸ Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 25.

⁷⁹ Buchan, 299.

⁸⁰ Moberly, 285.

instructors.⁸¹ At the moment, Dunsterforce's access to the Caucasus was blocked. If Dunsterville was to secure the British Mesopotamian Forces' eastern flank and contain the Central Powers' threat to British India, he would have to begin with North Persia.⁸²

On 26 February 1918, Dunsterville telegraphed the Imperial General Staff in London stating the necessity of securing the line of communication between Mesopotamia and the Caucasus.⁸³ This complemented earlier demands by the British Ambassador in Teheran, Sir Charles Manning, for a British military occupation in Northwest Persia to counter the instability in Persia and the growing threat from the Central Powers.⁸⁴

Since December 1917, a series of political assassinations in Teheran led British diplomats to believe that anti-British nationalists were ascendant.⁸⁵ They were concerned that the Ottomans and Germans in conjunction with the Jangalis would drive Persia into the war against the Allied powers. On 26 February, the same day Dunsterville sent his telegram, the Persian government resigned. On 1 March, the British government instructed Dunsterville to remain in Persia and stabilize the situation.⁸⁶ No longer an

⁸¹ Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 29.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 67.

⁸³ PRO CAB 24/43/80, Memorandum by General Dunsterville to Commander Imperial General Staff, repeated Baghdad and Delhi, delivered February 26, 1918, received February 28, 1918.

⁸⁴ Moberly, 282.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 268.

⁸⁶ PRO AIR 20/662/8, Secret Telegram no. 53319 Cipher from Chief London to General Dunsterville, Hamadan dated March 1, 1918.

independent mission, they placed his force under the command of the British headquarters in Mesopotamia.⁸⁷

Dunsterville established his headquarters in Hamadan. The city was strategically located between Mesopotamia and the Caspian Sea and was a significant crossroad for the road networks in the region. It was also a major commercial center and held over 50,000 inhabitants. The city had already served as the headquarters of the Russian Forces in Persia. Its commander, General Baratoff, and a British liaison officer remained in Hamadan.⁸⁸

The Russian Army wireless set allowed Dunsterville to communicate with Baghdad and London.⁸⁹ Dunsterville was also able to leverage the presence of a British consulate, Imperial Bank branch, and significant American missionary presence in the city. The British consul provided information on the political situation in the area. The American missionary grounds served as lodging for the troops and the missionaries themselves supported Dunsterforce's local initiatives. He selected the Bank house as his headquarters. Located at 7,000 feet in elevation it provided over watch of the city and surrounding region.⁹⁰ Thus, the selection of Hamadan as the headquarters held numerous advantages.

Yet Dunsterforce itself remained incredibly vulnerable. The initial main body was little more than platoon strength with 12 officers, 41 soldiers, and 2 NCOs. Additionally,

⁸⁷ Ford, 192.

⁸⁸ Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 25.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 55

British intelligence believed that the Ottomans were encouraging the Jangalis to seize Hamadan.⁹¹ In the short term, Dunsterforce had to appear stronger than it was to deceive and deter its opponents. However, to truly secure and stabilize Northwestern Persia, Dunsterforce would have to develop a local intelligence network, improve the lines of communication, provide humanitarian assistance, and establish local security.

⁹¹ Moberly, 283.

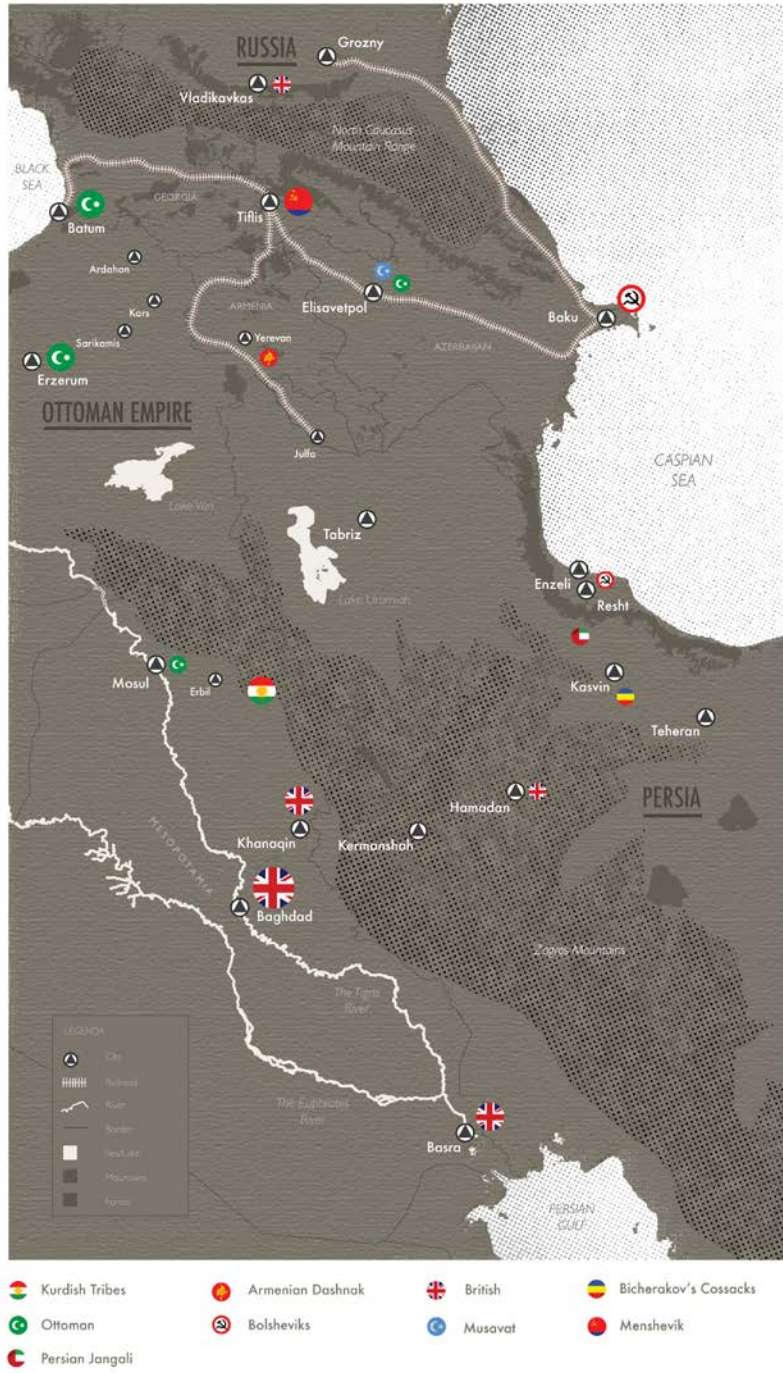


Figure 7. Area of Operations March 1918

Source: Created by Sven Hoogerheide, concept by author.

Intelligence

First, Dunsterforce developed an effective local intelligence network. The British recruited local sources throughout the surrounding community. These sources provided information on the “general situation in Persia, the local situation in Hamadan and the strength and position of the nearest Turkish detachments.”⁹²

In addition, through British control of the communication system, they were able to intercept telegrams between the Persian officials and others. This included the messages between the Ottoman military detachment closest to Dunsterforce and the Ottoman diplomatic legation in Teheran. Those encrypted messages that they could not read, they blocked. Through the interception of the communications, Dunsterville was able to accurately judge the objectives of the various factions. He learned that local political leaders were in contact with the Jangalis and the Ottoman legation.⁹³

Dunsterville also grasped the importance of identifying, understanding, and influencing the key leaders in the region.⁹⁴ According to Dunsterville, “we were able to know the exact degree of complicity with enemy agents of every single man of importance in the neighborhood, and knowledge of this sort is very literally strength.”⁹⁵ Armed with this knowledge, Dunsterville sought out the key leaders in the area, including

⁹² Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 60.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁹⁴ PRO AIR 20/662/211, Secret Telegram no. I/252 from Dunsterforce, Kasvin to MOCOL Resht, dated 28 June 1918.

⁹⁵ Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 61.

all “the officials, the landowners, the politicians and the merchants.”⁹⁶ These included the Governor, Deputy Governor, the “*Kar-guzar* who deals with foreign matters” and the Police Chief.⁹⁷ Both sides attempted to use these meetings to gather information on the intentions and capabilities of the other. Nonetheless, they also invariably led to the development of relationships and greater understanding between Persian notables and British leadership.

As important as the ability to intercept enemy communications was the ability of Dunsterforce itself to communicate with British policy makers. The 1st ANZAC wireless station began to build a chain of wireless stations to link the Caucasus with the British headquarters in Baghdad and London. This was a major undertaking since many of these wireless sets required a 6 horsepower Douglas engine with aerial wires hoisted on 50-foot towers. Additionally, the British built two permanent wireless stations on the grounds of the British consulate in Kermanshah and Hamadan.⁹⁸

Unsurprisingly, Dunsterville placed tremendous importance on learning the local languages. He instituted a language-training program for the men in his command. According to him, “it was necessary without further ado to tackle the language and get to know the officials and the people. Those of us who had a smattering of Persian soon learnt to improve our pronunciation, and those who knew none began taking lessons.”⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 86.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁹⁸ Occleshaw, 260.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

Humanitarian Assistance

Dunsterforce arrived in Persia in the midst of a tremendous humanitarian crisis. A great famine was sweeping through the country. The estimated number of Persians who died as a result ranges from the many tens of thousands to millions.¹⁰⁰ A modern historian has gone as far as describing it as genocide.¹⁰¹ Fighting between the Ottomans and Russians earlier in the war had led to food shortages and higher prices. By the fall of 1917, these shortages became a famine.¹⁰²

Major M. H. Donohoe, a former war correspondent and subsequent intelligence officer for Dunsterforce described:

Men and women, shriveled and huddled heaps of stricken humanity, lay dead in the public ways, their stiffened fingers still clutching a bunch of grass plucked from the roadside, or a few roots torn up from the fields with which they had sought to lessen the tortures of death and starvation.¹⁰³

Dunsterforce swiftly attempted to alleviate the crisis. Not the least among his motivations to do so was the desire to gain the support of the local population. Moreover, the question of who was responsible for the famine quickly became a psychological struggle between the British and their opponents. Immediately after the arrival of Dunsterforce, Persian nationalists and agents of the Central Powers told the citizens that the rise in the price of bread was the fault of the British and that they were the “advance

¹⁰⁰ Mohammad Gholi Majd, *The Great Famine and Genocide in Persia, 1917-1919* (New York: University Press of America, 2003), 3-5.

¹⁰¹ Majd, 3-5. His argument is primarily based on census data of the Persian population from U.S. State Department reporting but does not provide any evidence of an organized plan by any actors to eradicate the Persian people.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Donohoe, 76.

guard of an army” that “would eat up all the country and commit all sorts of atrocities. On the other hand, if . . . slaughtered, the army would never dare to come.”¹⁰⁴

Dunsterville felt compelled to directly address these rumors. He had a proclamation printed and posted throughout Hamadan that stated in part:

The British are here as quite a temporary measure, and have no intention at all of remaining in this part of Persia, where our presence is only necessary to counteract that of the Turks. In all lands our first care is that of the people . . . we have made no purchases of wheat and we are anxious to help to alleviate the famine.¹⁰⁵

Clearly, however, the purchases of grain by Dunsterforce and British troops elsewhere in Persia did exacerbate the crisis.¹⁰⁶ Yet it is also clear that the men of Dunsterforce did not sit idle in the face of the disaster. On the contrary, when the British command asked Dunsterville for his recommendations on how to proceed in North Persia, he immediately requested funds to support famine relief work.¹⁰⁷

The British believed that landowners and grain dealers were hoarding their stock to artificially maintain the high prices that had resulted from the increased demand emanating from the war. Upon the arrival of his deputy, Brigadier-General Byron, Dunsterville tasked him to ensure that a wheat control system was established.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 64.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ PRO AIR 20/662/10, Secret Telegram no. G-58 from General Dunsterville to Chief London, General Baghdad, C.G.S. Delhi and Britmilat Teheran. Dated 3 March 1918.

¹⁰⁸ Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 62. To enforce this system, Byron would arrest Persian officials in the ongoing psychological struggle between the British and their opponents. On 28 June 1918, Byron delivered a proclamation to the

Before Dunsterforce's appearance, American missionaries and the Imperial Bank of Persia had already instituted small-scale famine relief work.¹⁰⁹ Dunsterville proposed a much larger work program whereby the poorest citizens would be paid for a day's unskilled labor. Predictably, this labor would focus on "the construction of new roads and the improvement of those already existing."¹¹⁰ The British struggled to ensure that the most needy were selected for these programs. Nevertheless, these programs alleviated the suffering in areas under Dunsterforce's control. Sadly, however, much of the rest of Persia continued to suffer.

Lines of Communication

It is no coincidence that Dunsterforce's famine relief program focused on improving the road networks. The great vulnerability of the British in Northwest Persia was its long and tenuous supply line to the British forces in Mesopotamia. For many students of the First World War, conditioned by battles in France where success was measured in a few miles seized, the distances of Dunsterforce's area of operations are truly staggering. The distance from the British Headquarters in Baghdad to Baku was the equivalent of that of the British headquarters in France to Warsaw.¹¹¹ Dunsterville

people of Hamadan stating, "I have arrested and sent away for punishment Haji Agha Khan . . . Amongst many other bad deeds, he prevented wheat from being brought into feed the starving people of this city." PRO AIR 20/662/215, Proclamation to the people of Hamadan, dated 28 June 1918.

¹⁰⁹ Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 103.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹¹¹ Palmer, 195.

traveled 650 miles in his initial attempt to reach the Caucasus.¹¹² Moreover, 330 miles continued to separate Dunsterville's base in Hamadan from Baghdad.¹¹³

It was, in part, the logistical requirements of supporting British troops over these distances that led the commander of British forces in Mesopotamia, to oppose the Dunsterforce mission.¹¹⁴ The famine dashed initial hopes in London that Dunsterforce could live off the land. On the contrary, the British were now required to also transport food for the starving Persian population. A convoy of 750 trucks was later needed to supply a force in Hamadan that consisted, at its height, of less than a thousand British troops.¹¹⁵

Dunsterforce focused on improving the surface of the roads and reducing the worst of the gradients on the torturous mountain roads.¹¹⁶ Three fuel and spare-part supply dumps were developed along the route.¹¹⁷ Airfields were also built at four different locations. The arrival of a small contingent of four British aircraft improved Dunsterforce's reconnaissance and communication capability.¹¹⁸

¹¹² Townshend, 420.

¹¹³ Barker, 390.

¹¹⁴ PRO AIR 20/662/16, Secret Telegram X 7172 from General Baghdad to Dunsterforce Hamadan, dated 13 March 1918; Moberly, 217.

¹¹⁵ Barker, 391.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Perrett and Lord, 165.

¹¹⁸ Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 142.



Figure 8. Persian laborers constructing a road through the Asadabad Pass under the supervision of the British Army 'Dunsterforce'

Source: Imperial War Museum (Photo, London, UK: © IWM, Q 25041), accessed 20 February 2016, <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205213380>.

Where possible, Dunsterville tried to rely on local supplies. He built a bakery to feed British soldiers.¹¹⁹ Most importantly, Dunsterforce purchased fuel from the retreating Russians' depots.¹²⁰ The role of armored cars, trucks, and airplanes made Dunsterforce a truly motorized expedition. Consequently, the need for fuel and developed road networks were paramount. At one point, the force's major fuel dump in Hamadan erupted in flames and was destroyed.¹²¹ When the British finally reached the Caspian Sea, officers in Dunsterforce somehow convinced the Bolsheviks in Baku, their

¹¹⁹ Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 76.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹²¹ IOR L/PS/137, Telegram 2969, Secret Operations from G.O.C. Mesopotamia to War Office, repeated India, dated 6 July 1918.

opponents, to trade fuel for British vehicles.¹²² It was, according to Dunsterville, a shortsighted error on the part of the Bolsheviks for:

They wanted cars badly, but cars were far from being indispensable to them, whereas petrol was absolutely indispensable to me. Had they had the sense to see that they were gaining a very slight advantage and giving away a very valuable one, they might have refused the deal, and my force would have to cease all movement in Persia.¹²³

These initiatives would reduce but never eliminate the tremendous logistical requirements of a modern force operating at the furthest limits of its reach. Dunsterforce's lines of communication remained a concern throughout the campaign.

The development of Security Forces

Dunsterville realized that additional troops were “urgently needed” to secure Persia.¹²⁴ The original model of a small force of advisors for the Caucasus would not suffice. However, Lieutenant General William Marshall resisted attempts by the British cabinet to siphon off his troops to support Dunsterforce. He understood the immense logistical requirements and vulnerability of a sizeable British military presence dispersed throughout northwest Persia.¹²⁵ Nor, in the beginning, for lack of motorized transport, could those British Imperial forces recruited specifically for Dunsterforce enter Persia.

¹²² IWM 12425, Private Papers, Letter and Coded Signal Relating to Dunsterforce, 1918, Coded Telegram and Letter on 28 July 1918 from Major W.S. Browne in Enzeli to Dunsterville Staff explaining arrangement to trade vehicles for fuel.

¹²³ Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 170.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹²⁵ Moberly, 29.

Frustrated, these troops initially remained in Baghdad and spent their time learning languages.¹²⁶

In the meantime, security forces would come from those Russian troops willing to remain. Only a Cossack force under Colonel Lazar Fedorovich Bicherakov maintained the discipline necessary for British objectives.¹²⁷ The relationship that developed between Dunsterville and Bicherakov would be instrumental in ensuring the stability of North Persia and facilitating British entrance into the Caucasus.

Bicherakov commanded approximately 1,200 Cossacks.¹²⁸ He had an imposing presence and was “an *Ossietin* Cossack—one of those semi-wild tribes that are typical of the North Caucasus.”¹²⁹ His disciplined troops remained in Persia out of loyalty to their commander. In addition, there was already a British officer serving as a liaison to Bicherakov’s command. Lieutenant Colonel Clutterbuck was a Russian scholar and had developed an excellent relationship with the Cossacks.¹³⁰ On 23 March, the British

¹²⁶ A U.S. Army Cavalry Lieutenant Colonel inspected the Dunsterforce contingent while they staged near Baghdad. In a report to Washington on British Operations in the Middle East, he stated, “these men had been recruited throughout the Allied Forces, and by virtue of their previous experience and resolute character, were considered specially fitted for their mission. . . The Officers and men were equipped as British troops; and were altogether the most efficient looking crowd of high class, patriotic, and altogether worthy cut-throats and desperadoes that I have ever seen – they were superb.” LTC Edward Davis, “Operations in the Middle East” dated 12 July 1918 *The Papers of Edward Davis*, U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center (AHEC).

¹²⁷ PRO AIR 20/662/51, Secret Telegram no. G-174 from Dunsterville to Marling Teheran, repeated Baghdad, dated 3 April 1918 and Ford, 191.

¹²⁸ Ford, 188.

¹²⁹ Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 21.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

agreed to fund Bicherakov's force in order to secure Northwest Persia until British or Persian security forces were able to replace them.¹³¹ Marshall believed that Bicherakov held excessive influence over Dunsterville.¹³² After receiving complaints on the cost of supporting Bicherakov's forces, Dunsterville replied:

Bicherakov makes rather large financial demands, and the War Office asks if he is worth it. He certainly is. I do not consider his demands exorbitant, when you realize the task he is accomplishing and the fact that he alone can do it. We have no alternative.¹³³

On 28 and 29 March, a single British Infantry platoon and an airplane arrived in Hamadan to reinforce the small original detachment. At their arrival, Dunsterville considered "our position might be regarded as secure."¹³⁴ A second platoon deployed to Kermanshah, closer to the border with Mesopotamia. Additional detachments were soon positioned at five points along the route.¹³⁵

On 3 April, Dunsterville's deputy, Brigadier General Byron arrived with the second tranche of personnel, a force of 20 officers and 20 NCOs. Amongst their number included numerous Russian linguists, and a Lieutenant Akbar - a Persian living in England who "proved of the greatest value."¹³⁶ Later in April, C squadron of the 14th

¹³¹ Moberly, 273; Eden, 192.

¹³² Marshall, 307.

¹³³ Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 122.

¹³⁴ "Our position" most likely refers to the security of the initial contingent in Hamadan rather than to British objectives in North Persia. Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 112.

¹³⁵ Ford, 193.

¹³⁶ Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 82.

Hussars, three Rolls-Royce armored cars, and additional soldiers assigned to Dunsterforce arrived in Hamadan.¹³⁷

Dunsterforce and Marshall continued to disagree on the forces required for the mission. Dunsterforce believed that the minimum he required to secure Northwest Persia was an infantry brigade (consisting of four battalions) and cavalry regiment.¹³⁸¹³⁹

Marshall was equally adamant that he could not sustain a force larger than an infantry battalion and cavalry regiment. Ultimately, the British War Office would pressure Marshall to support Dunsterforce.¹⁴⁰ Livid, Marshall drafted a letter of resignation. After discussions with his staff, the letter was never sent because, “to resign in the middle of a war is not quite cricket.”¹⁴¹

In the meantime, the remaining contingent of 50 officers and 150 NCOs originally assigned to Dunsterforce arrived in May. Due to a lack of motor transport, they and the previous group had walked from Mesopotamia and to Dunsterforce, “seemed very fit after

¹³⁷ Browne and Bridges, 441.

¹³⁸ PRO CAB 24/43/80, Memorandum by General Dunsterforce to Commander Imperial General Staff.

¹³⁹ At one point, the British Ambassador in Persia, Sir Charles Manning, and Dunsterforce requested two full divisions to secure Northern Persia. This was rejected by Marshall. Marshall, 286.

¹⁴⁰ Ford, 193.

¹⁴¹ Marshall, 287.

their long march.¹⁴²” The group included specially selected Russian officers, refugees from Tsarist Guards regiments.¹⁴³

Marshall makes clear in his memoirs that he tried to avoid implementing the orders he received to support Dunsterforce.

Towards the end of May the passes into Persia were clear of snow, and I had no longer any excuse for not starting the invasion, though I had hoped against hope for the cancellation of the project.¹⁴⁴

As a result, the remainder of the 14th Hussars, a Field Artillery battery, and an infantry battalion task force from the Hampshires and Gurkas regiments arrived in June.¹⁴⁵ It took over 500 Ford trucks to transport this force, exhausting the fuel reserves of Dunsterforce.¹⁴⁶ This and the establishment of local security forces greatly improved the security situation in Northwest Persia.

¹⁴² Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 138.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ Marshall, 304.

¹⁴⁵ This task force consisted of “detachments from the 1/4th Battalion of the Hampshire Regiment-400 men, 1/2nd Gurkha Rifles-600 men, and two artillery guns of No 8 battery of the Royal Field Artillery with the leading squadron of DUNCARS.” A. H. Burne, *Mesopotamia: The Last Phase* (London: Gale and Polden, 1936), 89; Perrett and Lord, 168; Townshend, 424; Ford, 194.

¹⁴⁶ Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 156.



Figure 9. A British officer from Dunsterforce watches the instruction of Persian police at Resht

Source: Imperial War Museum (Photo, London, UK: © IWM, Q 24960), accessed 20 February 2016, <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205213375>.

The officers and NCOs of Dunsterforce trained and organized local Persian security forces.¹⁴⁷ The British consul in Kermanshah had instituted a similar force of Kurdish tribesman that patrolled the route to the border with Mesopotamia.¹⁴⁸ In North Persia, Dunsterville's orders were "to take energetic and immediate measures to frustrate

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 79. Not all of those who volunteered for Dunsterforce were content training local security forces, The Director of Military Intelligence in London wrote Dunsterville refusing to accept the resignation of certain Dunsterforce officers, "the desire to resign is probably due to the lack of the prospect of the immediate active service to which all looked forward." PRO AIR 20/662/72B, Secret Telegram no. 56800 from Dirmilint, London to Dunsterville, Hamadan, dated 20 April 1918.

¹⁴⁸ Ford, 193.

enemy penetration through North-West Persia”¹⁴⁹ As a result, Dunsterville envisioned using local irregulars to operate “guerilla-style” across the line of advance of an Ottoman attack into Persia.¹⁵⁰ By July 1918, this force had grown to 800 fighters.¹⁵¹ With Bicherakov’s Cossacks, a growing contingent of British troops, and a local security force, Dunsterville could now transition to the offensive, subdue the Jangali threat, and return to the Caspian Sea.

Clearing a path to the Caspian Sea

The British received information that suggested political elements within Baku were increasingly fearful of the Ottoman advance in the Caucasus and were seeking British support. However, on 4 May 1918, the War Office instructed Dunsterville not to proceed to Baku. The situation was still deemed too tenuous for such a move. Instead, they instructed Dunsterville to secure Enzeli and gain control of the Caspian Fleet.¹⁵²

On 1 June 1918, Dunsterville departed Hamadan, to establish his new headquarters in Kasvin, closer to the Caspian.¹⁵³ General Byron, Dunsterville’s deputy, remained in Hamadan. Dunsterville now needed to decide how to neutralize the Jangali threat. Before initiating hostilities, Dunsterville sent a trusted staff officer, Colonel Stokes, to negotiate with Kuchik Khan. Dunsterville was “anxious as to what might befall

¹⁴⁹ PRO AIR 20/662/14, Secret Telegram no. 54018 Cipher from Chief London (CIGS) to General Dunsterville Hamadan dated 12 March 1918.

¹⁵⁰ Ford, 193.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 443.

¹⁵² Moberly, 299.

¹⁵³ Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 139.

Captain Noel and the other prisoners in the hands of the Jangalis if we declared war on the latter.”¹⁵⁴ Dunsterville authorized Colonel Stokes to offer Kuchik Khan freedom of action in Persia’s internal political situation in return for the immediate release of all prisoners, the opening of the road to Enzeli, and a guarantee of “non-interference with movements of our troops on the road.”¹⁵⁵ The Jangalis refused to accept those conditions.

As a result, a combined arms task force consisting of Bicherakov’s Cossacks, a squadron of the 14th Hussars, and two armored cars departed from Kasvin on 8 June.¹⁵⁶ Their objective was to seize a key bridge defended by the Jangalis on the route to Enzeli. Supported by two British airplanes flying from the airfield established in Kasvin, the task force broke the Jangali defenses and opened the road to Enzeli.¹⁵⁷

Bicherakov and his men were increasingly impatient to return to Russia. Dunsterville had to “use all the tact and gifts of persuasion I possessed to restrain” Bicherakov.¹⁵⁸ The Cossacks left small detachments along the route until the British could provide troops to replace them. The rest of the Bicherakov’s force proceeded to Enzeli. Within a week, the British replaced these Cossack detachments.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁴ Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 156.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹⁵⁶ Browne and Bridges, 457.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 163.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 164.

Jangalis counterattack

The Cossacks were now concentrated in Enzeli and focused on returning to Russia. That left only the British to secure the lines of communication. Dispersed in small detachments they became tempting targets. The Jangalis counterattacked. On 18 June, a British infantry unit was ambushed and its captain killed.

The British response was swift. A mobile column of 800 British riflemen with two mountain artillery guns, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Mathews, fought the insurgents in a series of punitive raids and small unit engagements. The British estimated the Jangali force in the area to have over 2,000 fighters. The Jangalis had expert knowledge of the heavily wooded terrain, whose jungle like features gave the insurgent group their name. It provided them cover and freedom of maneuver.¹⁶⁰

However, British air attacks on their strongholds terrorized the Jangalis.

Nor were the British without their own experts in jungle warfare. As a prisoner of the Jangalis, Noel remembered:

One day I overheard a conversation which recounted how a number of *Jungalis* had been raided and surprised by small men armed with choppers with which they lopped off the heads of their opponents with a single stroke. I was at first somewhat puzzled as to who these small men could be, but it gradually dawned on me that the reference must be to our Gurkha troops with their famous *kukris*.¹⁶¹

The former Jangali base of Resht was now garrisoned by British troops. However, the majority of those troops were billeted outside of the city adjacent to the main road

¹⁶⁰ Browne and Bridges, 165.

¹⁶¹ Noel, 50

“which gave them considerable tactical advantages.¹⁶²” Unfortunately, only a squad of 12 men led by an NCO secured the British consulate in the center of the city.

At dawn on 20 July, the Jangalis struck. The main element attacked the British troops outside of town, while another contingent penetrated the heart of the city. The main Jangali force was easily defeated, leaving over a hundred dead and fifty prisoners including “several Austrians.¹⁶³” However, another Jangali force had reached and surrounded the British consulate. A British relief force of Gurkhas led by an armored car fought through the city streets and reached the consulate just as the insurgents were setting fire to the outer doors. Fierce urban combat continued for two days with the British using their aircraft to bomb Jangali strongpoints.¹⁶⁴ The British suffered 50 casualties in the battle.

The battle of Resht neutralized the Jangali threat.¹⁶⁵ It set the conditions for Dunsterville to conclude a treaty of peace, the first of the war, with the Jangalis. After four months as a prisoner, Captain Noel was released. Most importantly, the Ottoman threat to Persia was contained and the internal security situation in Persia improved. In the Caucasus, however, the situation was dire. Ethnic conflict divided the region. The Germans had secured Georgia. The Ottomans in alliance with local Tartars continued to advance on Baku. Revolutionary and counter-revolutionary factions split the Russians. Only the Armenians were united in their fear of a victory for their long time antagonists.

¹⁶² Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 165.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 203.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹⁶⁵ Moberly, 345.

Persia Line of Operation

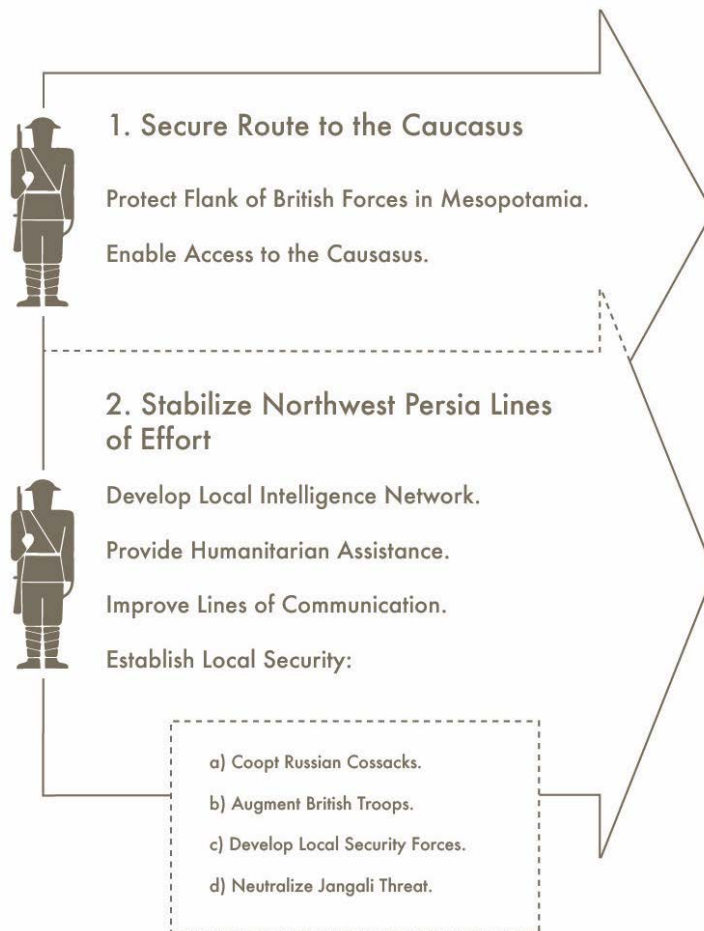


Figure 10. Persia Line of Operation

Source: Created by Sven Hoogerheide, concept by author.

Summary

British vulnerability in Persia led the high command to change Dunsterforce's mission. To deter a Turkish offensive and stabilize the political situation in Persia, Dunsterville was instructed to secure Northwest Persia, and in particular the line of

communication between Mesopotamia and the Caspian Sea. In this, Dunsterforce was successful. Through the skillful use of intelligence and diplomacy, Dunsterville was able to reduce Persian agitation.

However, the presence of British troops certainly contributed to the famine then ravaging the Persian population despite Dunsterforce's genuine attempt to alleviate the humanitarian crisis. The work/food programs implemented were obviously also used by the British to develop their lines of communication. Additionally, the construction of airfields and addition of an air arm allowed the British to extend their reach and reconnaissance capability.

Most pressing for Dunsterville was the need for troops. Without a sizeable ground force, the situation would remain tenuous. Bicherakov's disciplined Cossacks filled a critical gap. So too did the development of local Persian forces and the arrival of the men assigned to Dunsterforce from other theaters. However, Dunsterville would continue to request conventional British forces. In doing this, he would draw the ire of the British commander in Mesopotamia who feared the overextension of his forces and dissipation of his combat power. With the arrival of even small British conventional units, Dunsterville was able to secure his position and go on the offensive against the Jangalis.

Dunsterforce had been able to establish a thin screen in Northwest Persia. It is doubtful this screen line could have defeated a serious Ottoman military thrust. Conversely, its true utility was its deterrence to both the Ottomans and internal Persian opponents. As a result, Dunsterforce was successful in North Persia. The flank of British forces in Mesopotamia was protected and the route to Caucasus secured. Nevertheless,

the Central Powers continued to advance in the Caucasus. Dunsterforce had yet to truly influence the area of operations for which it had been designed.

CHAPTER 6

DEFENSE OF BAKU

The situation looks brighter but even “Stalky’s” inexhaustible energy is insufficient to bring order out of chaos here. There are too many conflicting parties, too much profiteering for rationing to be easily managed; lastly the material he has to mould into soldiery is too poor. He is a fine character, loved by everyone and positively adored by his personal staff. All his tact and diplomacy is needed there, but I fear the only solution of this problem lies in bringing a British division up – and to that, short-sighted Baghdad will never agree.¹⁶⁶

— Private AJ Foster, Hampshire Regiment,
Private Diaries, 10 August 1918

Ottomans Reorganize

In the Caucasus, Enver Pasha organized a new operational force, the Eastern Army Group. The Army Group consisted of the Third and newly formed Ninth Armies, as well as the Army of Islam. In total it had ten regular infantry divisions and assorted independent units of cavalry and irregulars.¹⁶⁷ Its new commander was Enver’s uncle, Halil Pasha.¹⁶⁸ Enver gave command of the Army of the Islam to his half-brother, Nuri Pasha, recently returned from leading Islamist guerilla forces in Libya.¹⁶⁹

Enver intended the Eastern Army Group to operate on a wide front. The Third Army would consolidate the Ottoman conquests in the Caucasus and continue east to

¹⁶⁶ IWM 17431, Private Papers of A.J. Foster, Hampshire Regiment.

¹⁶⁷ Erickson, 187.

¹⁶⁸ Bülent Gökay, “The Battle for Baku May-September 1918: A Peculiar Episode in the History of the Caucasus,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 34, no. 1 (January 1998): 42.

¹⁶⁹ Karsh and Karsh, 148.

advance towards the Caspian Sea while the Ninth Army pushed south into Persia.¹⁷⁰ The Army of Islam had “a hard core of Turkish divisions” but was meant to mobilize local Tartar Islamic forces.¹⁷¹ The fighting quality of local volunteers was valued over Islamic learning. When a Tartar Muslim holy man tried to enlist, he was ironically told “the Army of Islam is no place for men of religion.” There was a place, however, for former Tsarist Christian army officers who wished to destroy the Bolsheviks.¹⁷² There are few better examples of the confused and contradictory situation in the Caucasus of 1918 than Christian Russian officers volunteering to serve in a Turkish Islamic Army to defeat primarily Armenian Bolshevik forces loyal to Moscow. At the onset, the Army of Islam had approximately 10,000 troops.¹⁷³ On 10 July 1918, the Ottoman Army of Islam was officially activated and directed to seize Baku.¹⁷⁴

The British attempt to engineer an opening

The advance agents of Dunsterforce were not idle during these developments. Following the capture of Noel by the Jangalis, Colonel Pike in Tiflis ordered MacDonell to assume his responsibilities. Isolated in Baku, MacDonell once again acted as

¹⁷⁰ Erickson, 187.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 189.

¹⁷² Reynolds, *Shattering Empires*, 223.

¹⁷³ Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 167.

¹⁷⁴ Erickson, 189.

the British Consul.¹⁷⁵ He sought to influence the Baku Commune to collaborate with General Dunsterville.

Fortuitously, MacDonell had developed a relationship with the Bolshevik leader Stepan Shaumian. Many years earlier Shaumian had been a foreman at the same oil refinery where MacDonell worked.¹⁷⁶ Shaumian's house was open to MacDonell, and over many evenings MacDonell would play with the Bolshevik leader's son, stay late into the night, and attempt to convince Shaumian of the wisdom of accepting British aid. Nevertheless, to the Bolsheviks it was even more important to deny the city to the British than to the Ottomans.¹⁷⁷ Shaumian told MacDonell:

And you believe that an English General and a Bolshevik Commissar would make good partners. No!" he continued, "we will organize our own forces to fight the Turk. If the Turk wins then I shall lose, but if your English General and I form a partnership it is impossible that both can gain, for Communism and Capitalism can never share the spoils."¹⁷⁸

For a moment, as the Ottomans came closer, Shaumian's resistance to British aid softened. He demanded that were the British to arrive, they should fall under the Baku Soldiers' Committee and that this communist committee should have full authority over British troops including that of court martial.¹⁷⁹ These were stipulations that Dunsterville could not accept. Widespread rumors that the Baku Commune had, in fact, accepted

¹⁷⁵ MacDonell, 204.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 133.

¹⁷⁷ Reynolds, *Shattering Empires*, 228.

¹⁷⁸ MacDonell, 211.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 212.

British aid had to be dispelled by Stalin himself in the communist newspaper *Pravda* on 28 May 28 1918.¹⁸⁰

Crucially, MacDonell successfully convinced the Bolsheviks to plan the destruction of the oil fields in the city and destroy the pipelines to the territory controlled by the Central Powers. On 28 June he smuggled out a message reporting, “Secret Committee has been formed by Bolshevik government to go into question of oil destruction and had that day ordered removal of pipes, pumps, and engines along Baku *Adjikabul* line.”¹⁸¹ This feat would have strategic impact.

Shaumian refused to allow MacDonell to encrypt his communication from Baku. MacDonell sent telegrams in the clear to both Colonel Pike and the British Embassy in Teheran stating as such.¹⁸² Nevertheless, alternative means were developed for MacDonell to communicate secretly with Dunsterville. An Armenian lawyer arranged for the captain of a ship on the Caspian Sea to courier MacDonell’s reports to the British Consulate in Resht.¹⁸³

Later, a young Russian woman arrived unannounced at MacDonell’s residence. She had smuggled a message from Colonel Pike in Vladikavkas and volunteered to do the same for MacDonell. At first, MacDonell was wary she was an *agent-provocateur* sent by the Bolsheviks to compromise him. He was ultimately convinced by the passion of her

¹⁸⁰ Kazemzadeh, 128.

¹⁸¹ IOR L/PS/11/137, Secret Telegram X 23 from G.H.Q Mesopotamia to War Office, repeated India dated 5 July 1918.

¹⁸² MacDonell, 212.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 216.

Tsarist convictions, and she developed a network of female messengers who clandestinely couriered British messages. They would travel in various disguises and “became of vital importance.”¹⁸⁴

Political conviction was not the only motivation for those who chose to aid MacDonell. A former Tsarist secret service officer was now doing the same work for the Bolsheviks. Responsible for conducting counter espionage at the Baku wireless station, the man offered to transmit MacDonell’s encrypted messages for large sums of money.¹⁸⁵

A series of former Tsarist officers approached MacDonell with what he then believed were fantastic schemes to overthrow the Baku commune.¹⁸⁶ MacDonell thought it was much more realistic to enlist the Armenian Dashnaks and have them use their influence to alter the policy of the Bolsheviks.¹⁸⁷ Yet MacDonell was unable to contact members of the secretive organization.¹⁸⁸ Regardless, the activities of the British Consul intensified the suspicions of the Bolsheviks, who began to surveil him.¹⁸⁹ The atmosphere of distrust that permeated Baku underlines the deep divisions in the city obstructing the establishment of a coherent defense.

¹⁸⁴ MacDonell, 219.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 223.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 219.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 222.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 213.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 220.

Bicherakov's Toehold

Meanwhile, in Persia, Dunsterville closely followed developments in the Caucasus. On 27 June 1918, he visited Enzeli where Bicherakov's Cossack force was staged, hoping to return to Russia.¹⁹⁰ Shaumian had first established contact with Bicherakov in early May.¹⁹¹ Complex and secretive negotiations ensued between the seemingly contrary forces, a Tsarist Cossack unit and a Communist government of workers. As seen previously, the desperate situation in the Caucasus made strange bedfellows a necessity.

As a result, Bicherakov publicly declared his conversion to communism. The Baku Commune, desperate for trained and disciplined soldiers, offered him command of the Red Army in Baku, then numbering approximately 10,000 troops.¹⁹² Bicherakov hoped to organize the Red Army forces and defend Baku at the Kura River, west of the city.¹⁹³ Dunsterville was aware of these developments and he approved of them as a politically acceptable means to contain the Ottoman offensive.¹⁹⁴

Yet Bicherakov was always his own man and beholden to neither Bolsheviks nor the British. All the calculations behind Bicherakov's decision are unclear, but interestingly during this time, his brother was leading an Anti-Bolshevik revolt in the

¹⁹⁰ Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 166.

¹⁹¹ Suny, 288.

¹⁹² Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 167.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 168.

¹⁹⁴ Perrett and Lord, 168.

North Caucasus.¹⁹⁵ For Dunsterville, the rapprochement between Bicherakov and the Baku communists might invigorate the defense of Baku and deny the city's oil to the Central Powers. Furthermore, the landing of Russian forces tied to the British could provide the foothold necessary for the follow on of the rest of Dunsterforce.¹⁹⁶

Accordingly, Dunsterville directed a small British contingent to accompany Bicherakov. They would be the first combat elements of Dunsterforce to enter the Caucasus. The British contingent included those liaison officers who had been working with Bicherakov and four armored cars.¹⁹⁷ These would be the only British forces to serve under communist command during the interventions in Russia.¹⁹⁸

On 4 July 1918, the force departed Enzeli and arrived that night 35 miles south of Baku. Bicherakov chose this landing location to limit his vulnerability to a Bolshevik ruse and for its proximity to the front.¹⁹⁹ Shaumian came from Baku to welcome Bicherakhov.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁵ Suny, 291.

¹⁹⁶ Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 182. There is some indication that Dunsterville supported plans by Bicherakov to oust the Bolsheviks in Baku in coordination with his brother's rebellion in the North Caucasus. In a report dated 13 July, 1918, Dunsterville wrote, "we mutually agreed on plans which give great hope of success, but which I will not repeat here. . . . He is all for Russia, and the plans he intends to carry out are in the interests of Russia in general and the North Caucasus in particular, but they entirely coincide with our interests." Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 186.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 167.

¹⁹⁸ Perrett and Lord, 168.

¹⁹⁹ Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 167.

²⁰⁰ Suny, 291.

The Ottomans, however, had already crossed the Kura River. Furthermore, the discipline of the Red Army troops was nonexistent. Soldiers left the front at will, voted in committees against their commanders, and elected their own leaders.²⁰¹ These issues plagued the defense of Baku until its fall. As the Red Army fell back towards Baku, Armenian refugees clogged the road in front of them.²⁰²

On 26 July a British armored car reconnaissance patrol was cut off and went missing. The Bolsheviks guarding the bridge to their rear had deserted in the face of an Ottoman attack. A later British patrol spotted two stripped bodies they were unable to recover, but no trace of the vehicles.²⁰³

By the end of July, the Ottoman force had pushed Bicherakov and the Red Army back into the outskirts of Baku itself. Believing that the Baku commune would betray his Cossack force and disgusted with the behavior of the other Red Army troops, Bicherakov withdrew, with the remaining British armored cars, to the north Caucasus. Dunsterville believed this action to be “a fatal mistake.”²⁰⁴ The absence of a disciplined Russian force would be critical when the rest of Dunsterforce defended the city the following month.

It appeared that the city was doomed. Only 400 soldiers manned the outer defenses.²⁰⁵ Armenian leaders began negotiations to surrender.²⁰⁶ On 25 July 1918,

²⁰¹ Suny, 291.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 292.

²⁰³ Perrett and Lord, 169.

²⁰⁴ Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 199.

²⁰⁵ Suny, 317.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

rebelling against Bolshevik authority, opposing parties overwhelmingly voted to seek British aid.²⁰⁷ On 31 July, the Bolsheviks relocated their government to a steamship in the port.²⁰⁸ The Ottomans expected to conquer the city within hours.

The fortunes of war then changed. A Red Guards contingent under a 26 year old Bolshevik commander named Petrov was loading guns and ammunition on a ship as the Ottomans began to descend into the city from the heights above. Petrov turned the artillery guns around and fired a volley, surprising the Ottomans and blunting the attack.²⁰⁹

News of the Bolsheviks ouster and rumors that the British would be arriving heartened the defenders.²¹⁰ An Armenian Battalion returned to the front and counterattacked breaking the Ottoman attack.²¹¹ It was, according to Dunsterville, “one of those miracles . . . which seemed so frequently to intervene to defer the actual fall of Baku.”²¹² Yet the unschooled and undisciplined defenders failed to dislodge the Ottomans from the critical high ground west of the city.²¹³ Baku had been saved, for now.

²⁰⁷ Suny, 310.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 318.

²⁰⁹ Teague-Jones, 93.

²¹⁰ Suny, 321.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

²¹² Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 198.

²¹³ Allen and Muratoff, 490.

Coup and Counter Coup

Throughout July 1918, the armed battles outside Baku were mirrored by a clandestine struggle within the city. On 10 July, an extraordinary officer arrived in Baku and invigorated British measures to ensure Dunsterforce could enter the Caucasus.²¹⁴ Captain Reginald Teague-Jones, a former British Indian police officer now in military intelligence, had traveled overland from British India to arrive at the Caspian port city. The then 28 year old had been raised and educated in St. Petersburg and spoke at least five languages, including Russian.²¹⁵ Teague-Jones served in Dunsterforce's sister expedition in eastern Persia, (MALMISS), under the command of Major General Malleson. His wide remit and personal initiative would draw him into the struggle for Baku.

Teague-Jones informed the British Consul, MacDonell, that British policy was now anti-Bolshevik and that he should assist those forces willing to overthrow the Baku commune. He recommended using a coalition of the Social Revolutionary Caspian fleet, Armenians, and Tsarists centered at the military aviation school to organize a coup. Teague-Jones provided the names of possible key conspirators and left MacDonell with a "couple of thugs who called themselves former Tsarist officers."²¹⁶

With firm direction, MacDonell now actively supported those groups in the city in opposition to the Baku Commune. According to MacDonell:

²¹⁴ Teague-Jones, 60.

²¹⁵ West, 587.

²¹⁶ MacDonell, 224.

Teague-Jones' energy and enthusiasm were amazing. In spite of my twinges of conscience about my relations with Shaumian, he carried me with him. War is war and a dirty business anyway.²¹⁷

Two of Bicherakov's officers entered the city and began organizing a coup against the Baku Commune. They hoped to mobilize former Tsarist Army officers in the city and in coordination with the seaplanes of the local aviation school and the Caspian fleet, overthrow the Bolsheviks. In a series of furtive meetings, the mechanics of the plot were worked out.²¹⁸ One of Bicherakov's officers was a young Cossack who would carouse in the city's nightclubs with a deaf female companion as a cover to meet with MacDonell.²¹⁹ For the plotters it was critical to receive British funds for the operation.

MacDonell's ability to send and receive encrypted messages was compromised. Shaumian and the Baku Commune demanded that MacDonell decipher a message he had received from Dunsterville. MacDonell was successfully able to convince the audience that this message had been meant for a formally trained British intelligence officer and he lacked the ability to decipher it. In an indication of the fissures buried within the Bolshevik leadership, the message was later anonymously delivered to MacDonell's residence. MacDonell remembered the telegram from Dunsterville as instructions to:

Take all measures to prevent oilfields from falling into enemy hands, and if necessary, to associate myself and the funds at my disposal with certain schemes for destroying oilfields and evicting the Bolsheviks.²²⁰

²¹⁷ MacDonell, 224.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 226.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 227.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 232.

A later message smuggled by a former Tsarist General from Colonel Pike confirmed that MacDonell should fund the planned coup.²²¹

The leader of the coup was a Russian priest. MacDonell communicated with him through one of the female messengers who attended the priest's mass.²²² The priest planned to initiate the coup with a protest by the oil workers who would demand the British be allowed in to defend the city. For MacDonell, "the following days were perhaps the most enthralling in my life; I became absorbed. To none could the whole truth be told; many were suspect."²²³

The day before the planned takeover, one of Bicherakov's officers was arrested and the details of the plot revealed.²²⁴ The Bolsheviks moved quickly and crushed the incipient coup. Shaumian had MacDonell arrested and tried.²²⁵ Nevertheless, the surreptitious hand of the Armenian Dashnaks prepared MacDonell for the trial, and he was acquitted. It was now clear that the Dashnaks had been clandestinely helping MacDonell for some time.²²⁶ As the Ottomans advanced, the Armenians increasingly looked to Britain for assistance. MacDonell snuck out of Baku and reported to

²²¹ MacDonell, 233.

²²² *Ibid.*, 235.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 236.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 23-239.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 244.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 252.

Dunsterville in Kasvin. The Bolsheviks retried MacDonell and sentenced him to death in absentia.²²⁷

After meeting earlier with MacDonell, Teague-Jones had rushed to deliver the latest report on the situation in Baku. He stopped in Krasnovodsk on the other side of the Caspian where he found huge stores of cotton being collected for delivery to the Germans. By implanting false orders to halt delivery of the cotton and then sabotaging the wireless station, he ensured that the cotton never reached the Central Powers.²²⁸ Teague-Jones reported and returned to Baku. He arrived on 31 July, just as the city appeared to be falling, and attained a detailed map of the city in order to allow British forces to mine the harbor if the Ottomans seized Baku.²²⁹

As noted, in the final days of July, the Dashnaks and other socialist parties revolted against the Baku Commune. A new government, the Centro-Caspian Dictatorship, requested the arrival of Dunsterforce to save Baku. 3,000 Bolshevik troops, including Petrov's Red Guards, refused to continue fighting. The Bolshevik leaders prepared to evacuate the city, but were stopped by the Caspian Fleet's warships. The Bolsheviks leaders were confined to their ships at the port.

²²⁷ MacDonell, 254.

²²⁸ Teague-Jones, 67.

²²⁹ Ibid., 90.

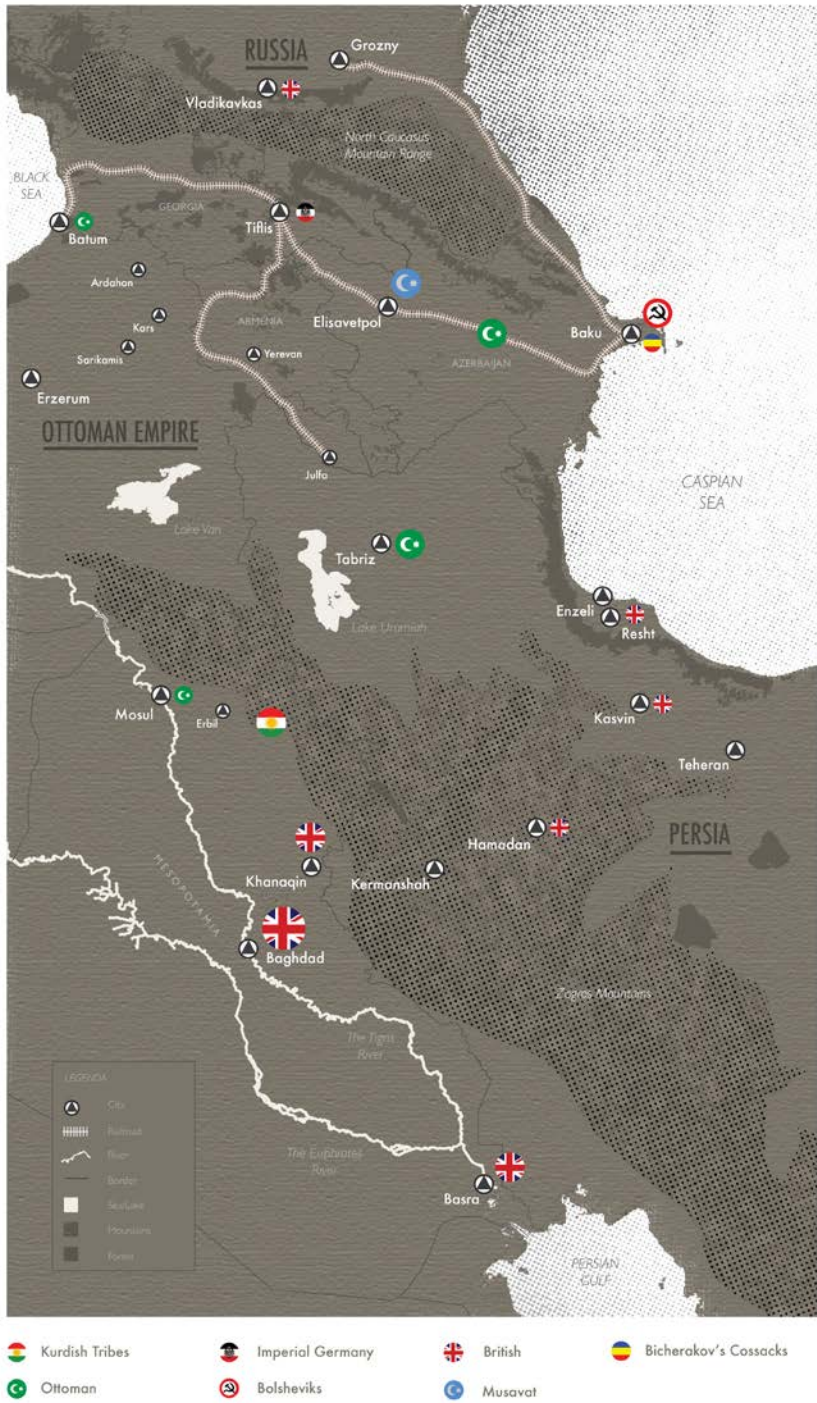


Figure 11. Area of Operation July 1918

Source: Created by Sven Hoogerheide, concept by author.

British Policymakers Debate

British policymakers were unsure whether Dunsterforce should, in fact, deploy to Baku. Discussions and debate ensued on the wisdom of such a move. As mentioned, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS) had earlier instructed Dunsterville not to proceed to the Caucasus.²³⁰ In the interim, representatives from political elements in Baku traveled to Persia to confer with Dunsterville and his staff. As early as 21 April 1918, an Armenian doctor representing the Armenian National Council discussed the possibility of collaborating with the British in Baku.²³¹ Dunsterville had also held similar secret discussions with the Socialist Revolutionaries, undoubtedly encouraging their subsequent revolt against the Bolsheviks.²³²

These contacts and developments in the Caucasus convinced Dunsterville that it was crucial to defend Baku.²³³ The trouble lay in convincing his superiors, especially Marshall in Mesopotamia. Accordingly, Dunsterville employed the full range of his diplomatic skills to garner support to join the battle in the Caucasus.

On 4 July 1918, Dunsterville traveled to Teheran to meet with the British Ambassador Sir Charles Manning. Dunsterville briefed Manning on the situation and secured his backing.²³⁴ On 7 July, the War Office instructed Dunsterforce to proceed to

²³⁰ Ford, 192.

²³¹ Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 115.

²³² *Ibid.*, 186.

²³³ Donohoe, 212.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 181.

Baku, should the situation allow it.²³⁵ On 14 July, Dunsterville traveled, by car and airplane, to Baghdad to confer with his higher headquarters.²³⁶ He stayed for 48 hours and returned ready to seize an opportunity, should it present itself, to land in Baku.²³⁷ As a result of vehicle breakdowns, he did not return to Kasvin until 23 July.²³⁸ Those nine days had seen momentous changes in the Caucasus.

Dunsterville requested a brigade to deploy to Baku. Always cautious, Marshall instructed Dunsterville to first assess the situation in the city and report back before such a move.²³⁹ Marshall's vocal opposition to the operations of Dunsterforce had led the Eastern Committee of the British cabinet to question whether Marshall would execute their directives. As a result, the CIGS, General Henry Wilson, privately wrote Marshall and warned him to "keep out of my communiqués anything which might indicate an unwillingness" to support Dunsterforce. The depth of Marshall's hostility is highlighted by his reply to Wilson, when he wrote, "I hated the whole business . . .the only parallel to an attempt to operate on a large scale at the end of 700 miles of road was Napoleon's Moscow Campaign and that could hardly be called an unqualified success."²⁴⁰ Clearly, the military high command was using private correspondence to mitigate directives by British political leadership to support Dunsterforce.

²³⁵ Ford, 194.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 195; Ford, 194.

²³⁸ Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 195.

²³⁹ Marshall, 307.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 311.

The circumstances dramatically changed when Marshall next chose to take a month's leave in mid-July.²⁴¹ It now appears incredible that the commanding officer of the MEF chose to depart during such a critical moment. Nonetheless, it must be remembered that Marshall viewed operations in Persia and the Caucasus as a distraction from the primary area of operations in Mesopotamia. While on leave in India, Marshall unsuccessfully attempted to convince the British political and military leaders there of the folly of Dunsterforce's mission.²⁴²

Regardless, it appears that in Marshall's absence, Dunsterville was able to convince the acting MEF commander and War Office to commit forces to the struggle for the Caucasus. The acting commander, Major General Hew D Fanshawe, did something that Marshall had apparently never thought necessary.²⁴³ He visited Dunsterville and inspected the area of operations. He reported that, in fact, Dunsterforce was accomplishing the mission that it had been assigned with the limited forces provided.²⁴⁴

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 307.

²⁴² Marshall, 308; IOR L/MIL/5/806/81 Memorandum for record on what occurred in Northwest Persia and shores of Caspian by H.V. Cox India Office dated 25 September 1918, 4-5.

²⁴³ In June, Marshall conducted a "partial inspection" of the lines of communication in Persia but "owing to pressure of work, I was unable to get much beyond Kermanshah" and thus never visited Dunsterville's headquarters. Marshall, 306.

²⁴⁴ Harry Fecitt, "Dunsterforce Part 1," The Western Front Association, accessed 25 November 2015, <http://www.westernfrontassociation.com/the-great-war/great-war-on-land/other-war-theatres/3305-dunsterforce-part-1.html#sthash.kiBaGIYO.dpbs>.

Thus, a full brigade, the 39th,²⁴⁵ was sent to reinforce Dunsterforce.²⁴⁶ This was the combat power for which Dunsterville had earlier pleaded in vain. As these troops marched up from Mesopotamia, Dunsterville quickly dispatched the small combat forces available to alter the balance in Baku.

The Defense

MacDonnell departed from Enzeli on 1 August and returned to Baku, the death sentence of the now interned Bolsheviks no longer a threat. MacDonnell was given “the singularly unpleasant mission of telling the Armenians and *Centrocaspie*²⁴⁷ that Dunsterforce would be late.”²⁴⁸ The constrained available combat power of Dunsterforce and the continued need to suppress the Jangalis limited the British forces that could be immediately sent to aid Baku.

On 4 August, Lieutenant Colonel C.B. Stokes arrived in Baku with an escort of 40 British soldiers from the Hampshires regiment and four officers. Dunsterville had dispatched Stokes to ascertain the situation in the city and decide whether it would be feasible for the British to help defend it. A crowd greeted them with them cheers at the pier.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁵ The 39th Brigade consisted of the 7th Battalion, North Staffordshire Regiment, 7th Battalion, The Gloucestershire Regiment, 9th Battalion The Royal Warwickshire Regiment and 9th Battalion the Worcestershire Regiment. Perrett and Lord, 170.

²⁴⁶ Marshall, 310.

²⁴⁷ This is another term for the Baku government, also known as the Centro Caspian Dictatorship, which overthrew the Bolsheviks and sought British aid.

²⁴⁸ MacDonell, 256.

²⁴⁹ IWM 2347, Private papers of Colonel C.B. Stokes.

Their arrival, and the expectation of even greater British reinforcements in the future, bolstered the morale of the Armenian troops, who repulsed the Ottoman attack and caused the Ottomans to halt their offensive, reorganize, and request reinforcements.²⁵⁰ Assuming the Ottomans had already seized Baku, a detachment of German staff officers arrived in the port on the same day. They landed and demanded to be taken to the Ottoman military headquarters. British Lieutenant Ward, originally sent to destroy a non-existent bridge, heard about the German arrival. He immediately boarded their ship and arrested the Germans. The government in Baku protested that this action was a violation of their internal affairs.²⁵¹ It is clear that the British and their nominal allies in Baku did not share the same objectives.

An Armenian emissary from Baku traveled to Persia to express his disappointment on the size of the initial British deployment. Dunsterville took this opportunity to write an official letter stating the nature of British support. On 7 August, he wrote:

The defense of Baku appears to me quite feasible . . . provided that the inhabitants of Baku are heart and soul with us in our determination to defeat the enemy. . . . The entire *defence* cannot be undertaken solely by the British.

Herein lay the crux of the matter. The British lacked the troops necessary to defend Baku alone and the inhabitants of the city were hopelessly divided. This dilemma would plague the defense of the city until its seizure by the Ottomans.

Dunsterville's brother in law, Colonel Robert Keyworth, arrived with more reinforcements and took tactical command of the British forces in Baku. Stokes served as

²⁵⁰ MacDonell, 257.

²⁵¹ Teague-Jones, 94.

the chief of staff of the local Baku Army. Soldiers from the North Staffordshire regiment, armored cars, and more machine guns arrived. Keyworth reported to Dunsterville on the immense difficulty in defending the city with the limited British troops available.²⁵²

Dunsterville also feared it might be impossible to extricate those British soldiers committed to Baku.²⁵³

British policy makers were aware of these concerns and willing to risk the lives of the British force to delay the capture of Baku. On 14 August, the India Office wrote the British Director of Military Intelligence (DMI),

If Stokes and Keyworth are anywhere near right in their estimate of the situation, there is little doubt that anything we can send to Baku will only postpone the evil day of its surrender. But there is always a chance of the unexpected happening, and postponement at any rate is valuable. Dunsterville's opinion of the unlikelihood that he can withdraw his troops from Baku when he wishes to do so may be modified by his visit to the place, and he may also be able to effect some working arrangement with the Fleet. Anyhow, it seems to us here that it is worthwhile risking the few troops that are there or can be sent there. Put evidently we must be prepared at any time to cut our losses at Baku.²⁵⁴

It is clear that the policy makers primary objective was to delay the capture of Baku by the Central Powers rather than indefinitely defending the city.

Dunsterville understood that it might be necessary to evacuate the British forces from the city and commandeered ships to ensure that Dunsterforce had independent means of transportation. *The President Kruger* became his flagship and headquarters

²⁵² Ford, 194.

²⁵³ IOR L/MIL/5/806/42 Letter from H.V. Cox, India Office to DMI Macdonogh dated 14 August 1918.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

while the *Kursk* and *Abo* were procured in Baku. After receiving Keyworth's report, Dunsterville sailed to Baku aboard the *President Kruger* to inspect the defenses.²⁵⁵

The defensive line around Baku was roughly twelve miles long. To the west of the city, starting at the southern shore, was a line of easily defended cliffs, broken only by a draw, known as the Wolf's Gap. Approximately four miles north, the cliffs disappeared into flat open terrain at the railway station of Balajari. The most significant high ground was a terrain feature called the Mud Volcano. The Mud Volcano was in the middle of the oil fields that reached back into the outskirts of the city. Further north was a salt lake and the northern shore of the Apsheron Peninsula on which Baku was located.²⁵⁶

²⁵⁵ IOR L/MIL/5/806/42 Letter from India Office to DMI dated 14 August 1918.

²⁵⁶ Allen and Muratoff, 493.

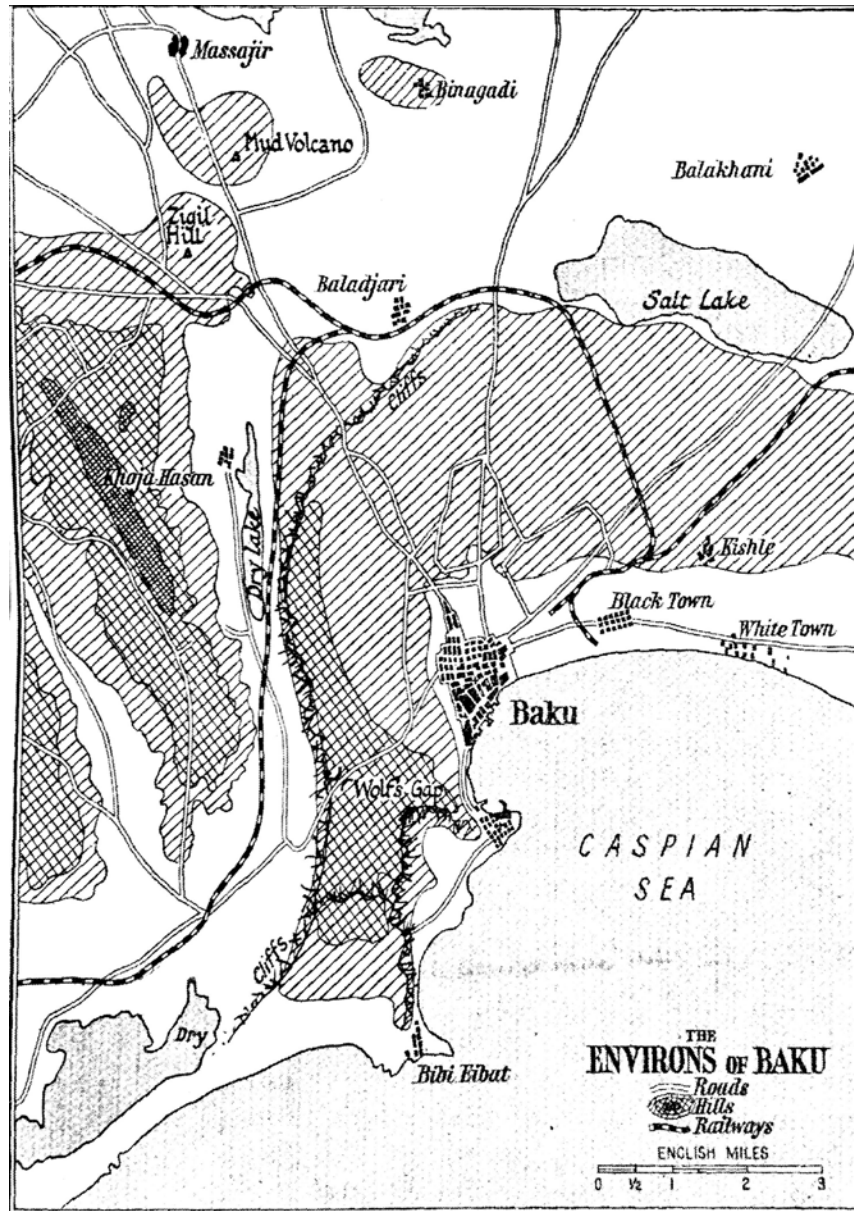


Figure 12. Map of Baku

Source: Dunsterville, *Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 221.

Approximately 10,000 troops—primarily Armenians, but also Russians, and a few Tartars—manned the line. However, most of these forces had little training and few had any discipline. Revolutionary fervor infected the local forces. Committees of soldiers

debated whether to execute the orders given to them. Many soldiers would leave their positions to stay with their families in the city.²⁵⁷

The British concept of defense was to take their limited forces and intersperse them amongst the local defenders at crucial positions in the line. 110 men of the North Staffords regiment defended the Mud Volcano. Four other groups, each of 50 British soldiers, were emplaced at other key terrain.²⁵⁸ Additional reinforcements arrived from the Worchesters and Royal Warwicks infantry regiments, as well as a battery of artillery and a contingent of armored cars. Approximately a 100 men from the original Dunsterforce contingent also went to Baku. They were dispersed amongst the local defenders to advise and assist them. Through these men, the defense could be coordinated and it was hoped they would serve as examples to the local troops.²⁵⁹

The front line consisted of intermittent shallow trenches, reinforced at some locations with sandbags.²⁶⁰ For British soldiers with knowledge of the advanced trench systems of the Western Front, the defenses were incredibly feeble. Keyworth led efforts to strengthen the defenses and ordered barbed wire to be emplaced.²⁶¹

²⁵⁷ IWM 4179, Oral History, Adjutant of the North Staffordshire Regiment, Leslie R. Missen recorded by the BBC in 1963.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ PRO WO 95/5043, Operation Order No: 5 by Lt. Col Keyworth, D.S.O. R.A. commanding British Troops Baku, 4 August 1918.



Figure 13. British Dunsterforce officer supports Armenian forces

Source: Imperial War Museum (Photo, London, UK, 1918: © IWM, Q 24891), accessed 20 February 2016, <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205194962>.

The lack of food in the city dogged residents and British defenders alike. British troops on the frontlines were fed coarse black bread, tea, and water, impregnated with the oil that was everywhere in the city. The British discovered a depot in the city filled with barrels of caviar. Thus, the British soldiers were also fed large quantities of caviar, a taste for which most of the young troops had not acquired and did not appreciate.²⁶² Dysentery was rampant.

On 11 August, the defenders attempted to recapture the suburb of Mastagi, the location of the main water supply and food for the city. However, the Ottomans were prepared and defeated the attack with interlocking machine gun fire. A British gunner of

²⁶² IWM 4179, Oral History, Adjutant of the North Staffordshire Regiment, Leslie R. Missen recorded by the BBC in 1963.

one of the armored cars was killed through well-aimed fire at the gun ports of the vehicle.²⁶³ By the middle of August, Tartar irregulars began to infiltrate the lightly defended lines in the north of the peninsula.²⁶⁴

On 26 August, after receiving reinforcements, the Ottomans launched a major attack to seize the city. Their initial objective was the railway junction at Balajari.²⁶⁵ A ferocious fight ensued at the Mud Volcano. D Company of the North Staffords resisted the onslaught of two Ottoman battalions for three hours, beating back five successive attacks before being decimated. By the time they were pushed off the Mud Volcano, all the officers of the company had been killed or wounded and 80 soldiers were missing.²⁶⁶ The Armenian battalion to its left fled from the field at the beginning of the attack. The Armenians to the right of the Volcano stayed put after their British advisor shot one of the soldiers in the leg when he tried to run.²⁶⁷ The British rushed reinforcements to the threatened sector. Another company of the North Staffords saw that the crest of the hill was not yet occupied and raced the Ottomans to the top. Jumping in the trenches below the summit, they destroyed the Ottoman force from a hasty reverse slope defense.²⁶⁸

The city had once again been saved. However, the British losses and behavior of the local defenders led Dunsterville to contemplate the benefits of further fighting.

²⁶³ Perrett and Lord, 172.

²⁶⁴ Allen and Muratoff, 493.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 173.

²⁶⁶ Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 267.

²⁶⁷ Perrett and Lord, 173.

²⁶⁸ Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 266.

According to him, “it now became an urgent question as to whether I could justify myself in allowing more lives to be risked in a cause that seemed beyond all hope.”²⁶⁹ The defenders withdrew to shorten the line, now from Binagadi to Digya and anchored by high ground once again occupied by the North Staffords.

Meanwhile, after extending his leave a week General Marshall returned to Baghdad.²⁷⁰ Aghast at what had occurred in his absence, he divided Dunsterville’s command. Dunsterville remained in command of the forces in Baku but not those in Northwest Persia. Marshall halted those troops marshaling in Persia for onward movement to Baku. They would remain in Persia to counter an Ottoman thrust from Tabriz. Marshall also refused Dunsterville’s request for another brigade to defend the city.²⁷¹ Thus, by a bureaucratic sleight of hand, Marshall crippled Dunsterforce. Dunsterville and a small force had to fight alone in Baku without recourse to the British troops in Northwest Persia that until recently had been a part of the same command.

It is here where some fault lies with Dunsterville. In the midst of the confused and changing situation, he failed to continually communicate with his higher headquarters. The British high command grew increasingly frustrated with the sporadic and conflicting updates they received from the field.²⁷²

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 267.

²⁷⁰ Marshall, 310.

²⁷¹ Ibid., 311.

²⁷² IOR L/MIL/5/806/84 Memorandum for record on what occurred in Northwest Persia and shores of Caspian by H.V. Cox India Office dated 25 September 1918, 7.

On 31 August, the Ottomans attacked once again and overwhelmed the defenders. The North Staffords Company Commander on the high ground was killed and those survivors withdrew to “avoid complete annihilation.”²⁷³ A ferocious fight ensued amongst the oil derricks and pumping equipment.²⁷⁴ The Armenian units in the area retreated in disorder and exposed the flanks of the Royal Warwick position, forcing a further withdrawal.²⁷⁵

It was increasingly clear to Dunsterville that without significant changes the Ottomans would inevitably capture the city. He met with the local defenders’ commander and the dictators in political control of the city and later that day wrote them a letter encapsulating his thoughts. In it he stated that no further British reinforcements were expected and the Ottoman gains would now allow them to shell the city itself. He also appealed to them to instill fighting ardor amongst the local troops. Dunsterville wrote, “I am willing with my troops to continue the *defence* to the bitter end, but it is quite hopeless to endeavor to do so with troops who have no intention of fighting.”²⁷⁶

The Baku military commander, General Dukuchaiev, invited Dunsterville to attend a council of war that evening. The council meeting symbolized the political chaos that was inhibiting an effective defense. Representatives from soldiers and sailors committees, the Armenian National Council, oil workers, peasants, and the political dictators filled the room. Everyone presented competing courses of action and drowned

²⁷³ Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 271.

²⁷⁴ Ford, 196.

²⁷⁵ Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 272.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 276.

each other out in chaotic debate. No decision had been reached by the time Dunsterville and the British staff officers departed the council at one in the morning.²⁷⁷

The following day, on 1 September, Dunsterville invited the Baku dictators to the British headquarters at the Hotel d'Europe. He informed them that the British would withdraw from the city and recommended they evacuate the city's non-combatants and seek terms with the Ottomans. On 4 September, the dictators sent a poignant letter reminding Dunsterville that because they had chosen to seek British aid the Bolshevik government had abandoned them and therefore they refused to allow Dunsterforce to leave.²⁷⁸ The Caspian fleet's gunboats were ordered to fire on the British ships should they attempt to depart. It appeared that Dunsterville was in an impossible position. He lacked the troops necessary to defeat the attacking enemy and would be destroyed by his allies if he withdrew.

Increased calm along the front lines in the first week of September renewed hope that Baku might be saved.²⁷⁹ Bicherakov sent 500 men from the North Caucasus to reinforce the defenses.²⁸⁰ British training of the local forces progressed. On 4 September, 1918, Dunsterville organized the evacuation of 10,000 Armenian women and children

²⁷⁷ Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 276.

²⁷⁸ PRO WO 95/5043, Letter from president of the Dictatorship M. Tushkoff to General Dunsterville dated 4 September 1918. At the same time, the Baku dictators had been secretly negotiating through contacts in Georgia to surrender the city to the Central Powers. The negotiations collapsed due to distrust between Germany and the Ottoman Empire. Kazemzadeh, 142.

²⁷⁹ Ford, 198.

²⁸⁰ Allen and Muratoff, 494.

from the city.²⁸¹ On 12 September, Marshall ordered Dunsterville to halt the evacuation of non-combatants.²⁸² Fortunately, many of them had already escaped Baku for the Ottomans were now constantly shelling the city.²⁸³

Nor were the defenders only fighting the enemy outside the city. Many of the surviving members of the Tartar population inside Baku supported the Ottoman Offensive. Through smuggled messages, telephone calls, and signaling, they provided the besiegers the disposition of the defensive positions and location of Dunsterville's headquarters.²⁸⁴ A British officer described the city as "full of spies."²⁸⁵ Very accurate Ottoman artillery fire bombarded the British headquarters at the hotels d'Europe and Metropole.

Dunsterville never stopped trying to influence the Tartar community of Baku, estimated at 80,000.²⁸⁶ Against the wishes of the Russian and Armenian leaders, he met secretly with Tartar notables in the city. Such endeavors were ultimately fruitless. The rift between the different communities was too great for an outsider to bridge.

²⁸¹ PRO WO 95/5042, Appendix R, Telegram no. G 343 from Advanced Dunsterforce to Dunsterforce HQ Kasvin, dated 4 September 1918.

²⁸² PRO WO 95/5042, Appendix U, Telegram no. X 273 from GHQ Baghdad to Dunsterforce HQ Kasvin, dated 12 September 1918.

²⁸³ Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 291.

²⁸⁴ Bey, 199.

²⁸⁵ IWM 4179, Oral History, Adjutant of the North Staffordshire Regiment, Leslie R. Missen recorded by the BBC in 1963.

²⁸⁶ Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 235.

The Ottomans dispatched the 36th Caucasian Division to Baku, replacing casualties incurred fighting for the city. On 12 September, the Ottoman Army of Islam was estimated to have approximately 8,000 Turkish troops and between 6,000 and 7,000 Tartar irregulars. The city's defenders were no more than 8,000.²⁸⁷ British forces consisted of 1,300 soldiers, 900 of whom were on the firing line and 400 employed in assorted other duties.²⁸⁸

On 13 September, an Ottoman officer deserted to the defenders. He was a Christian Arab who had studied at the American University in Beirut and a fluent English speaker. Livid at the way the Ottoman Turks had treated his people; he told the British that the main Ottoman assault would begin the following day.²⁸⁹ This intelligence was disseminated to the defenders, and secret orders were prepared, if necessary, for the British evacuation of the city.²⁹⁰

The Withdrawal

Early on 14 September 1918, the final Ottoman offensive began. At 0430, 3,000 Ottomans and Tartars attacked the far right of the line to fix the defenders. At the other end, the main Ottoman effort consisting of eight to ten Turkish battalions, preceded by an artillery bombardment, struck the Wolf's Gate. By 0745, the Ottomans had seized the

²⁸⁷ Allen and Muratoff, 494.

²⁸⁸ Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 303.

²⁸⁹ IWM 2347, Personal Papers of Colonel Stokes, Statement of Turkish officer who gave himself up to 39th Brigade dated 13 September 1918, 13.

²⁹⁰ PRO WO 95/5043 Very Secret Memorandum no. G/406 from Dunsterforce HQ to Officer, Commanding British Troops dated 12 September 1918.

ridgeline directly overlooking the city.²⁹¹ The decisive point of the defense had been reached. Baku could no longer be held.

By 1200 that day, Dunsterville decided to evacuate the city. He subsequently informed the dictators of Baku who refused to allow the British force to leave. The North Staffords were ordered “to hold at all costs” their position “covering the south and western entrances to the town” while the rest of the British forces withdrew.²⁹²

By the afternoon, the Ottomans had reached the outskirts of Baku. The British and Ottomans engaged in hand to hand fighting and lobbed grenades at each other amidst the warren of city streets. The sun set around 1900. By that time, the Ottoman attack culminated, exhaustion overcoming both the attackers and defenders, and a lull set over the battlefield. British troops marched back in sections to the docks, guarded by pickets placed at key intersections.²⁹³

The city itself had begun its descent into the throes of chaos. Refugees streamed towards the docks and desperately attempted to board the ships leaving Baku. Gangs of Tartars were already looting Armenian houses and murdering or raping those who had not escaped. Fires began to break out in the city; the British soldiers acting as guards fired from street corners and bound back to the ships.²⁹⁴

²⁹¹ PRO WO 95/5043, Report by Lieutenant Colonel Keyworth to Headquarters Dunsterforce dated 19 September, 1918.

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ IWM 4179, Oral History, Adjutant of the North Staffordshire Regiment, Leslie R. Missen recorded by the BBC in 1963.

²⁹⁴ Rawlinson, 57.

Dunsterville had kept his ships ready for this eventuality. The fastest were reserved for troops. The last, much slower, was loaded with ammunition and weapons to deny this equipment to the Ottomans. At 2200, the Dictators arrived at the pier and demanded that the British disembark. This, Dunsterville refused to do. The Dictators threatened to order the Caspian Fleet's ships to fire on the British troopships.



Figure 14. Refugees leaving the town of Baku

Source: Imperial War Museum (Photo, London, UK, 1918: © IWM, Q 24935), accessed 20 February 2016, <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205213356>.

The British ships immediately departed, trusting that the Dictators' chaotic government would be unable to communicate in time with the Caspian Fleet's gunboats. These gunboats were stationed at the entrance to the harbor, ten miles from the piers. The British controlled ships sailed with no lights to not betray their positions. British troops

closely guarded the ships' Russian seamen to ensure they did not betray the movement. The first ship escaped unnoticed. The second was challenged but through the flashing of multiple signals, confused the gunboat for a few crucial minutes. The gunboat ultimately fired but missed. The third ship, filled with explosives, approached the mouth of the harbor close to midnight. Colonel Rawlinson held a pistol to the Russian captain's head to guarantee that he continued to steer the ship out to sea.²⁹⁵ The guard ships fired at the third ship, and holed it in six places above the waterline. Miraculously, none of these shells set off the explosives stored in the ship's hold.²⁹⁶ All the British ships had successfully escaped. They now began the long trip back. Early on 15 September, the following was telegraphed to British headquarters:

Baku was evacuated last night after sixteen hours of continuous fighting of which the British troops bore the brunt. Force strength about 1,200 all ranks. Will arrive tonight at Enzeli.²⁹⁷

There are few military operations more difficult than a withdrawal when in contact with the enemy. Such difficulty was multiplied in the case of Dunsterforce, a unit outnumbered by both an advancing enemy as well as hostile allies and with its back to the sea. That Dunsterforce was able to do so successfully was a result of meticulous planning and the discipline of British soldiers willing to lose their lives to ensure the escape of

²⁹⁵ PRO WO 95/5043, Account of obtaining possession of the steamer "Armenia" at Baku on the night of 14th September and subsequently getting her "out" by Lieutenant-Colonel A. Rawlinson, 2.

²⁹⁶ Rawlinson, 98.

²⁹⁷ PRO WO 95/5042 C902/62, Telegram B 518 from AADminez to Dunsterforce, Kasvin, dated 15 September 1918.

their comrades, as well as the ability and initiative of Dunsterforce to exploit the confusion of a city at night in the throes of its final downfall.

On the ship back to Enzeli, Colonel Stokes was ecstatic at their escape,

For the last fortnight in Baku I had seen only two possible endings to our adventure, either one would be killed fighting or find oneself marching to Turkey, a prisoner of the Turks. It was a great relief to find that we had been able to get all our people away and we were a very cheerful crowd in the saloon. General Dunsterville, who was sitting at another table, hearing me say the word "General" several times, called to me and asked what I had got to say. I explained that I was telling my table that, if I ever were a General, which I hoped would never happen the problem I would set field officers up for their promotion examination would be the situation at Baku on the morning of September 14th, 1918. They would all be ploughed for no one would dare to give the correct answer, which was to evacuate Baku.²⁹⁸

British losses in defense of Baku were approximately 280 killed, wounded, and missing. The final day's battle cost the Ottomans an estimated 2,000 casualties.²⁹⁹ The North Staffords suffered the brunt of the British casualties. Fifteen of its officers and 100 men had been killed. Upon their arrival in Enzeli, only 3 officers and 100 soldiers were fit for duty.³⁰⁰

Summary

In the spring and summer of 1918, Enver Pasha reorganized his forces to ensure that the Ottomans captured the oil rich city of Baku. The different political and ethnic groups in the Caucasus were divided in their response to the Ottoman offensive. British

²⁹⁸ IWM 2347, Personal Papers of Colonel Stokes, 13.

²⁹⁹ PRO WO 95/5043 Report on Operations 14 September 1918 by Lieutenant Colonel Commanding 39th Inf. Brigade dated 15 September 1918, 3.

³⁰⁰ IWM 4179, Oral History, Adjutant of the North Staffordshire Regiment, Leslie R. Missen recorded by the BBC in 1963.

intelligence officers attempted to influence these groups to allow Dunsterforce to enter the region. However, the Bolsheviks in control of Baku refused to collaborate with Britain, a capitalist power they feared more than the Ottomans.

Consequently, Dunsterville supported an attempt by the Cossack commander Bicherakov to command the Red Army defending the city. Clandestine maneuvers by both sides ensured that neither trusted the other and they could not stem the Ottoman advance. The imminent fall of the city forced the Armenians and other Socialists in Baku to overthrow the Bolsheviks and plead for British help.

British policy makers were divided on whether to approve such an action. Dunsterville overcame this vacillation and thrust the small British forces available to him into the defense of the city. Through the creative use of his limited troops, he denied the city and its oil to the Central Powers for a crucial month.³⁰¹

This came with a cost. His superior, the British commander in Mesopotamia, limited his command to the force already in Baku and denied him the British troops staging in Persia. From that moment, the defense of Baku was doomed. Those British soldiers in the city fought bravely. Nevertheless, the enemy outnumbered them, revolutionary chaos destabilized their nominal allies, and Ottoman sympathizers infiltrated the city. In the face of overwhelming difficulties, Dunsterville evacuated his

³⁰¹ For the opposing argument, see Alum Bati's two-part article, "1918: Azerbaijan at War," *Visions of Azerbaijan*, accessed 20 January 2016, <http://www.visions.az/en/news/686/ecbd8399/#s1=1>.

forces, saving Britain from a debacle in the final months of the war.³⁰² Tragically, those residents of the city who had not yet escaped now faced the wrath of the attackers alone.

³⁰² IOR L/MIL/5/806/25, Paper on the Operations of Dunsterforce by H.V. Cox, Military Department-India Office, dated 25 September 1918, 6.

CHAPTER 7

AFTERMATH

Wouldn't it be wonderful to kill all Russians in our country. And not only the Russians-kill all these foreigners who talk and pray and think differently from us. . . . We must exterminate all foreigners. He spoke the word exterminate with such tender longing as if it meant love.¹

— Kurban Said, *Ali and Nino*

The Massacre

The unexpected British withdrawal led to the collapse of the remaining defenses. The commander of the Baku Army, General Dukuchaiev, reported panic spreading through the local troops on the evening of 14 September. Many of the defenders began boarding steamers to flee Baku. That night, the Centro Caspian dictators decided to negotiate the surrender of the city.² Dukuchaiev and the dictators boarded ships early on the morning of 15 September.³ Many neighborhoods had already devolved into a chaos of pillaging and murder.

At the same time, some Russian and Armenian units continued to man their defensive positions. A member of the Baku government, Kristofor Evangulov, was tasked with delivering the Ottomans a letter surrendering the city. However, fighting continued throughout the morning of 15 September and Evangulov could not cross the front lines.⁴

¹ Kurban Said, *Ali and Nino* (New York: Overland Press, 1937), 114-115.

² Jacques Kayaloff, *Fall of Baku: Material on the Events of September 15, 1918* (Bergenfield, NJ: Michael Barour Publications, 1976), 5.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Kayaloff, 10.

Not all of the British troops had escaped from Baku. Australian Major H.B. Suttor and Sergeant Bullen had been forgotten and continued to fight with their Armenian and Russian troops in the northeastern sector of the defenses throughout 14 September. Through force of will, Suttor was able to motivate the Armenians and Russians around him to continue fighting. Due to the secrecy of the British evacuation and the chaos of the battle, both men did not discover that the rest of the British troops had withdrawn until 09:30 the next day, 15 September. Earlier that morning at 05:00, Suttor led a dawn raid with 100 men on the railway station at Sabunchi to recover the ammunition that was stored there. While at the station, Suttor saw the first evidence of the massacre of Armenians that had begun the night before. Over 200 Armenian men, women, and children had been slaughtered as they tried to escape by train.⁵

Suttor and Bullen retreated to the city, which they found in mayhem. The Ottomans continued to shell Baku. Columns of smoke from oil fires smothered the sky. When they reached the wharves, only two ships remained. Both had raised their anchors and refused to allow the men to board. The Ottomans then began to shell the wharves themselves and in the confusion, Suttor and Bullen scrambled aboard.⁶

By 13:00, surrender negotiations were completed, but the Turkish troops did not immediately enter Baku to take possession of the city.⁷ While the Ottoman regulars remained outside, the Tartars sought vengeance for earlier atrocities committed by the

⁵ IWM 2914, Report of Major H. B. Suttor.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Kayaloff, 12.

Armenians.⁸ Some claim that the Tartars demanded from the Ottomans the observance of an age-old custom allowing them time to plunder the city.⁹ Later that afternoon Evangulov escorted an Ottoman colonel into the city in the hope that they would begin to reestablish order. He remembered:

Robberies, murders, rapes were at their maximum, in the whole town, the massacres of the Armenian population and robberies of all the non-Muslim population was going on. They broke the doors and windows, entered the apartments, dragged men, women, and children and killed them in the street. . . In some spots there were mountains of dead bodies. From Telephone Street we heard cries of women and children and we heard single shots. Rushing to their rescue I was obliged to drive the car over the bodies of dead children. The crushing of bones and strange noises of torn bodies followed. The horror of the wheels carrying the interiors of dead bodies could not be stood by the Colonel and the Asker.¹⁰ They closed their eyes with their hands and lowered their heads.¹¹

Estimates of the casualties from the massacre range from 9,000 to 35,000.¹² Essad Bey's¹³ dramatic memoirs describe the massacre as,

surely the most horrible that the Caucasus has ever seen. It was as through under one chapter of history a bloody line was drawn at last, which would put an end for ever to the Russian sovereignty.¹⁴

⁸ Ford, 199.

⁹ Bey, 201.

¹⁰ An Asker is an Ottoman or Turkish soldier.

¹¹ Kayaloff, 12.

¹² Ibid., 7, and Suny, 337.

¹³ Essad Bey is an enigmatic character. Originally born Lev Nussimbaum in Baku, he later converted to Islam and changed his name to Essad Bey. After the Russian Revolution, he migrated to Berlin, where he wrote about his life in the Caucasus. He may also be the author Kurban Said. For a biography of this interesting man, see Tom Reiss, *The Orientalist: In search of a man caught between East and West* (New York: Random House, 2005).

¹⁴ Bey, 203.

Epic at Urumiah

Meanwhile an epic retreat had unfolded in Persia. In June, small British outposts were established in Bijar and Mianeh. These detachments from Dunsterforce were meant to provide early warning of Ottoman movements and develop relationships with the local tribes in the area. From Bijar a road led to Urumiah.¹⁵ Urumiah was the home of Armenian, Assyrians, and Nestorian Christians. All these groups, led by the Nestorian Patriarch Mar Shimon and Assyrian chief Agha Petros, had successfully fought off earlier incursions by the Ottomans.¹⁶ By the spring of 1918, two understrength Ottoman divisions surrounded these forces.¹⁷

In July, an airplane from Dunsterforce flew into the Christian camp, and a plan was devised to support their fight against the Ottomans with “ammunition, machine guns, and money.”¹⁸ The Assyrians would break out and link up with a squadron of the 14th Hussars who would be escorting Dunsterforce advisors with ammunition, weapons, and gold.¹⁹ The British detachment waited for five days after the Assyrians failed to make the rendezvous and the commander of the 14th Hussars, Colonel Bridges, decided to pull

¹⁵ Browne and Bridges, 458.

¹⁶ Donohoe, 135-137.

¹⁷ Dunsterville, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce*, 179.

¹⁸ Browne and Bridges, 458.

¹⁹ BL IOR/L/PS/11/137, Telegram X 154 from G.O.C. in C. Mesopotamia. To War Office, Repeated India, Teheran. Dispatched 12:25 p.m. 10 July 1918 received 8 a.m. 11 July 1918.

back against the advice of the Australian Captain M.G Savige, assigned to work with the Christians.²⁰ Savige and his detachment waited nearby to link up with the Christians.

By 2 August 1918, Petros' warriors broke out of the encirclement and linked up with the small Dunsterforce detachment.²¹ During Petros' absence, the Ottomans struck the main body of Christians in Urumiah. Thousands of Assyrians fled the onslaught. An American missionary and his wife led a rear guard to defend the huge column of refugees streaming out of the city.²² Ottoman troops and Kurdish irregulars began raiding the column, carrying off young women and killing the refugees.²³ Savige organized a force of two officers, six NCOs, and three Lewis machine guns to defend them.²⁴ This small body of troops fought a desperate rear guard struggle to protect the refugee column until reinforced by a small detachment of the 14th Hussars.²⁵ Ultimately, 50,000 of the Urumiah Christian community made it to safety. From Hamadan, they were sent to Baqubah in Mesopotamia where the British built a large refugee camp. To Marshall, this was one more burden of the Dunsterforce campaign;

I suppose that from the humanitarian point of view one could not do less than we did, but what these refugees eventually cost the British tax-payer I would be

²⁰ Browne and Bridges, 463.

²¹ Savige, 126.

²² Ibid., 132.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 148.

afraid to say. We are an altruistic nation, and this was one of the penalties we had to pay for the ill-advised Persian venture.²⁶

Endgame

After escaping from Baku, Dunsterforce's fleet and the thousands of refugees it escorted arrived in Enzeli.²⁷ British control of shipping on the Caspian Sea blocked a direct Ottoman advance on Central Asia.²⁸ With the loss of Baku, and a new division in the British areas of operation, Marshall took the opportunity to relieve Dunsterville of his command.²⁹ Dunsterville traveled slowly back to Baghdad. On 17 September, he handed over his command to Major General WM Thomson. In Baghdad, Dunsterville wrote in his diary, "everybody very nice, but a general sort of feeling that I have been a naughty boy and ought to be put in the corner."³⁰ British Ambassador Charles Marling was also replaced and joined Dunsterville in Baghdad.³¹ On 1 October 1918, Dunsterville wrote

²⁶ Marshall, 306.

²⁷ MacDonell, 266.

²⁸ C. H. Ellis, *The British "Intervention" in Transcaspia: 1918-1919* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1963), 58.

²⁹ Marshall, 312; Ford, 199. On 16 September 1918, Dunsterville wrote in his diary, "a wire telling me to return to Baghdad. I am not offended. I have done excellent work under trying conditions, and produced very good results out of nothing in spite of apathy and misunderstanding of War Office and Baghdad. But after my telegrams they had no course but to relieve me and to try me, I suppose by Court Martial. Thank God Rawlinson and his little steamer arrived all well after having run a heavy gauntlet of fire. Armenian refugees a great problem." Dunsterville, *The Diaries of General Lionel Dunsterville*, 16 September 1918.

³⁰ Dunsterville, *The Diaries of General Lionel Dunsterville*, 28 September 1918.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 27 September 1918.

“to the British Officers and Non-Commissioned Officers of Dunsterforce” extolling their accomplishments.³²

Marshall then disbanded Dunsterforce itself. Dunsterforce’s original volunteers, decorated veterans from all the fronts of the war, were reassigned. To Marshall, they were a dangerous nuisance. General Thomson would command a more conventional task force named the North Persia Force or NORPER.

Meanwhile, when Major Suttor escaped Baku by slipping aboard one of the final ships in the city, he inadvertently joined the Bolshevik leaders who had been confined since their overthrow.³³ These Bolshevik leaders, including Shaumian and Petrov, decided to land at the city of Krasnovodsk on the other side of the Caspian to avoid the concentration of British forces in Enzeli.³⁴ There they fell into the hands of an anti-Bolshevik junta who executed them.³⁵ The Bolsheviks later accused British intelligence officer Teague-Jones of orchestrating their execution.³⁶ Teague-Jones had advised the junta after leaving Baku. The execution of the 26 Baku Commissars helped poison the relationship between the Soviet Union and Britain and became a communist *cause*

³² IWM 13647, Dunsterforce Order of the Day no. 1 by Major General L.C. Dunsterville dated 1 October 1918. See Appendix C for full order.

³³ IWM 2914, Report of Major H. B. Suttor.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Hopkirk, *Like a Hidden Fire*, 367.

³⁶ Mitrokhin, 80.

celebre. Teague-Jones would subsequently live under an assumed name, Ronald Sinclair, until his death in 1988.³⁷

After the conquest of Baku, Enver Pasha continued to chase his dreams of a Pan-Turkic Empire. British control of the shipping on the Caspian Sea blocked an Ottoman advance eastward. Hence, while a division of the Army of Islam remained to occupy Baku and established a Tartar government, the rest of the force invaded the North Caucasus.³⁸ Bicherakov's Cossacks delayed their advance and retreated further north. Enver's foolhardy decision further dispersed the Ottoman Army.

On 19 September 1918, General Allenby, the commander of the British Army in Palestine, initiated his final offensive against the Ottoman forces in the Galilee. Over five days, the British shattered the Ottoman Army in a series of engagements known as the battles of Megiddo.³⁹ Allenby and the Arab Army with Lawrence raced to Damascus.⁴⁰ The Ottoman offensives in the Caucasus and Persia had left no significant reserve to defend Constantinople.⁴¹

On the Western Front, the tide had irrevocably turned. In late September, the Allied Supreme Commander, Marshal Ferdinand Foch, initiated the fourth of his

³⁷ Teague-Jones, 12.

³⁸ Allen and Muratoff, 507.

³⁹ Palmer, 238.

⁴⁰ Edmund Dane, *British Campaigns in the Nearer East: 1914-1918: From the Outbreak of the War with Turkey to the Armistice. Vol. II, The Tide of Victory* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1919), 163.

⁴¹ McMeekin, 150.

coordinated blows on the German Hindenburg line.⁴² Immersed in these final struggles Ludendorff desperately sought the oil that the capture of Baku had promised. On 23 September, he ordered specialists deployed to Baku to restart oil production.⁴³ Meanwhile, the weakest of the Central Powers, Bulgaria, collapsed and signed an armistice on 29 September 1918. Bulgaria's fall eliminated the lines of communication between Germany and the Ottoman Empire.⁴⁴ No oil from Baku would reach Imperial Germany.⁴⁵

The Ottomans quickly followed Bulgaria. British forces in the Balkans pivoted towards the Ottoman capitol.⁴⁶ Belatedly, on 2 October, Enver ordered the Ottoman Army to evacuate the Caucasus to defend Constantinople. It was too late. On the same date, knowing the end was near, the British ordered Marshall to seize Mosul and "as large a portion of the oil bearing regions as possible."⁴⁷ Once again, Marshall moved

⁴² Palmer, 211.

⁴³ Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (New York: Norton and Company, 1967), 561.

⁴⁴ Fromkin, 368.

⁴⁵ McMeekin, 404. Dunsterforce's denial of Baku oil was more decisive than they knew. In October 1918, the German High Command estimated that naval operations could not continue past six to eight months, that those industries that required oil would have to halt operations in two months, and the supply of industrial lubricants would run out in six months. Air and mechanized land operations would cease in two months in order to allow other land operations to continue with rationed fuel. Yergin, 183.

⁴⁶ Strachan, 323.

⁴⁷ Fromkin, 364.

hesitatingly forward, drawing the ire of the British high command.⁴⁸ On 30 October 1918, the Ottoman Empire signed an armistice ending the war on Britain's terms.⁴⁹ The First World War in the Middle East was over. A little over a week later, the war would end in Europe too, when the Germans signed an Armistice on 11 November 1918.⁵⁰

Thus, the operations of Dunsterforce played a small but important role in the Entente's ultimate victory. Wartime British Prime Minister David Lloyd George believed that Dunsterforce had,

served the purpose of keeping the oil wells of Baku out of reach of the Central Powers at a critical period of the War, and it was now too late for the enemy to make any use of them. Six weeks later, Turkey was out of the War.⁵¹

It is natural to question the opinions of the political leader who dispatched the expedition. Yet even Ludendorff noted the effectiveness of Dunsterforce, "the English from *Enseli* crossed the Caspian Sea at the beginning of August and took possession of the town. Their occupation of Baku . . . was a serious blow for us."⁵²

⁴⁸ McMeekin, 401. Marshall would not capture Mosul until 10 November 1918, eleven days after the Armistice with the Ottoman Empire had ended the war in the Middle East. Ulrichsen, 146.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 409; Colonel George G. Nasmith, *Canada's Sons in the World War: A complete and authentic history of the commanding part played by Canada and the British Empire in the World's Greatest War* (Toronto, Canada: John C. Winston, 1919), 176.

⁵⁰ Strachan, 325.

⁵¹ George, 3195.

⁵² Ludendorff, 303.

On 17 November, the now-renamed Norperforce, under General Thomson reoccupied Baku.⁵³ A young British soldier noted in his diary, “when we arrived the Turks had not cleared away all the locals whom they had massacred - the bay was thick with corpses.”⁵⁴ The British decided to occupy Baku and the eastern Caucasus using two full infantry brigades with artillery and to deploy a further two brigades to Tiflis and the western Caucasus.⁵⁵ This was much more than the combat power Dunsterville had earlier pleaded for in vain.

Former Dunsterforce staff officer, Colonel Stokes, became the British representative to the new Azerbaijan republic.⁵⁶ MacDonell also returned to Baku and was tasked with ensuring that the Ottomans evacuated the Caucasus.⁵⁷ He grew increasingly frustrated with the expansive and inconsistent British foreign policy goals for the region.⁵⁸

Lord Curzon, now the British Foreign Secretary, hoped to establish strong independent states in the Caucasus.⁵⁹ Under British influence, the states of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia were meant to contain the Bolsheviks and secure the approaches

⁵³ The War Cabinet ordered Marshall to re-occupy Baku on 1 November 1918, while the war against Germany continued. This was done, in part, to forestall a reported planned occupation of the city by German troops. Fisher, 183.

⁵⁴ IWM 17431, Private Diaries of Private A. J. Foster.

⁵⁵ MacDonell, 278.

⁵⁶ IWM 2347, Personal Papers of Colonel C.B. Stokes, CIE, DSO, OBE.

⁵⁷ MacDonell, 287.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 283.

⁵⁹ Reynolds, *The Long Shadow*, 90.

to India.⁶⁰ These ambitions turned to disillusion when faced with the intractable ethnic rivalries of the region and the general war weariness of the British. On 22 January 1919, British General George Francis Milne⁶¹ wrote to CIGS Wilson from a train traveling from Tiflis to Baku:

It must be remembered that the various States in the Caucasus for the past 100 years have been practically ruled by an autocratic regime, kept in force only by armies. The result has been to develop a fierce hatred of Russia and in fact of all elements of law and order. The country has now been allowed to split up into so-called republics, each ruled by men of very advanced socialistic ideas little removed from Bolshevism at the head being one or two educated men in Georgia and Azerbaijan but not elsewhere. The remainder are illiterate and dishonest demagogues of the worst type with no ideas of administration . . . The inhabitants of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan cordially loath each other only a little less than they loathe the Russians . . . From a purely military point of view I cannot see what we are to gain by remaining in Trans-Caucasia. . . . The country and the inhabitants are equally loathsome and we seem to be accepting an enormous responsibility which will incur great expense for no very great reason. . . . I am fully aware that the withdrawal of the British troops would probably lead to anarchy but I cannot see that the world would lose much if the whole of the inhabitants of the country cut each other's throats. They are certainly not worth the life of one British soldier. . . . I think it wants to be clearly understood at home that if we accept responsibility to help these countries we will have to retain troops here not only for one or two years but possibly for 10 years, while the education of the people to manage their own affairs will be the work of several generations.⁶²

⁶⁰ Fisher, 186; Kazemzadeh, 272. According to H.V. Cox at the India Office, "After all this is not going to be a big job, and will probably be effectually performed by holding Batum and Baku, and the railway line between, and Tiflis. An arrangement of this kind would avoid the danger of placing any Great Power on the most feasible and most direct land route to the East from Central Europe." IOR L/MIL/5/806/95, Minute on meetings held by Eastern Committee from H.V. Cox dated 3 December 1918, 1-2.

⁶¹ Immediately after the end of the First World War, Milne commanded the British Army of the Black Sea from which he wrote the letter quoted above.

⁶² George Francis Milne, "Private and Confidential Letter from Milne to Wilson 22 January 1919," in *The Military Correspondence of Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson 1918-1919*, ed. Keith Jeffery (London: Bodley Head for the Army Records Society, 1985), 77-79.

Exasperated and exhausted, the British retreated as the resurgent Turks and Soviets advanced.⁶³ Under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal, the Turks defeated the numerous powers that sought to take advantage of the Ottoman's defeat.⁶⁴ Afterwards, on 1 November 1922, he abolished the Ottoman sultanate itself, creating the modern state of Turkey.⁶⁵

Geopolitical imperatives trumped Britain's grandiose ambitions. Kemal's Turkey and Soviet Russia forged an alliance of convenience against the Allied powers.⁶⁶ Turkey retained control of Kars and Ardahan, first recaptured by the Ottoman 1918 offensive.⁶⁷ Simultaneously, the Soviet Red Army began reconquering the rest of the Caucasus. The last independent republic, Georgia, finally fell on 17 March 1921.⁶⁸ There, the borders and balance of power in the region remained until the end of the Cold War.⁶⁹ With the support of the Soviet Union, Kuchik Khan helped to establish the short lived Soviet

⁶³ British and Allied leaders hoped the United States would accept a mandate over Armenia. President Wilson agreed to accept the responsibility, despite a U.S. Army General's report questioning the viability of such an undertaking. The United States Senate voted overwhelmingly to reject the President's request. Kazemzadeh, 262.

⁶⁴ Earle, 305.

⁶⁵ Emin, 284.

⁶⁶ McMeekin, 445, 465.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 446.

⁶⁸ Kazemzadeh, 328.

⁶⁹ German experiences in World War I and the allure of oil would encourage the Nazi regime to attempt to occupy the Caucasus in World War II and fail. Michael Geyer, "German Strategy in the Age of Machine Warfare, 1914-1945," in *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 553, 579.

Socialist Republic of Iran.⁷⁰ Later, the Iranian government arrested and executed Kuchik Khan. It was according to Colonel Stokes, “a sad ending to the career of a man who was an honest Persian patriot.”⁷¹

In the twenties, a small group of Armenian survivors sought vengeance for the slaughter of their people during the First World War. Their operation was named Nemesis “after the Greek goddess of retribution.”⁷² With the possible help of British intelligence, they tracked down and assassinated the Young Turk leaders living in European exile. The assassins were later acquitted in a German court, in part due to the testimony of German officers who had witnessed the suffering of the Armenians during the war.⁷³

Only Enver Pasha escaped. He convinced the Soviets that he could quell Turkic uprisings in Central Asia. After being inserted, he revealed his true allegiances and fought an Islamist insurgency against the Communists.⁷⁴ He died leading a cavalry charge, still loyal to his Pan-Turkic dreams.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Cosroe Chaqueri, *The Soviet Socialist Republic of Iran, 1920-1921* (Pittsburg, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995), 3.

⁷¹ IWM 2347, Personal Papers of Colonel C.B. Stokes, CIE, DSO, OBE. “Some Experiences in Persia, 1918”, 8. Attempting to escape across the high altitude Alborz mountain range, Kuchik Khan was caught in a snowstorm and almost froze to death. Iranian government soldiers discovered and decapitated him. His head was presented to Reza Khan, future Shah of Iran, in Teheran. Chaqueri, 465.

⁷² Eric Bogosian, *Operation Nemesis: The Assassination Plot that avenged the Armenian Genocide* (New York: Little Brown, 2015), 1.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Hopkirk, *Setting the East Ablaze*, 158.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 169.

After the war, Edward Noel served as a political officer in Mesopotamia. While assigned there, he advocated British support for a Kurdish state. Another British intelligence officer who opposed Noel's plans wrote in his diary, "Noel is an interesting study, typical of many Englishmen who espouse small peoples. He knows no fear, but this is because his *valour* is born of ignorance."⁷⁶

For a time, Dunsterville returned to command an infantry brigade in India after which he retired and wrote. When his friend Rudyard Kipling attempted to console him with the unfairness of his relief of command, Dunsterville sought no sympathy, " 'wrong as usual' . . . 'If any officer under me had written what I did to the War Office, I'd have him broken in two-twos.' " Kipling believed, "that fairly sums up the man –and the boy who commanded us."⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Richard Meinertzhagen, *Middle East Diary 1917-1956* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1959), 127.

⁷⁷ Rudyard Kipling, *Something about Myself for my Friends Known and Unknown* (London: MacMillan, 1937), 28.

Caucasus Line of Operation

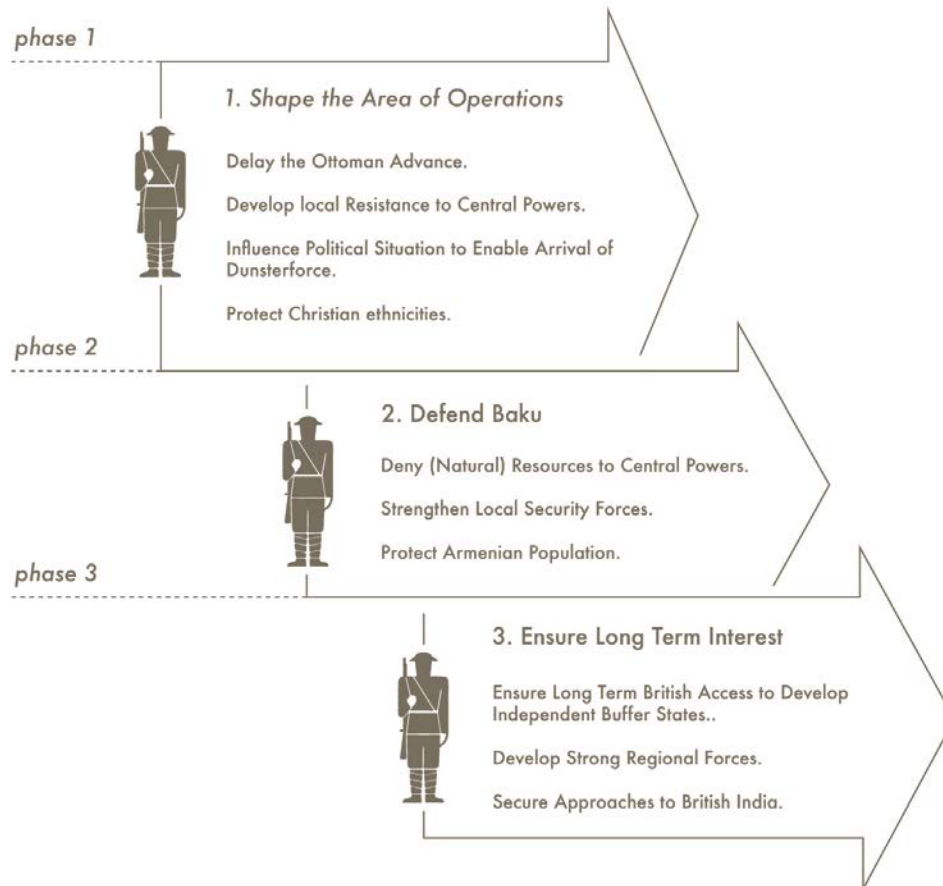


Figure 15. Caucasus Line of Operation

Source: Created by Sven Hoogerheide, concept by author.

Summary

Dunsterforce had been able to miraculously save his troops from destruction in Baku. Although by doing so, the remaining Armenian and Russian defenders and the

Christian residents of the city were left to face the wrath of the conquerors by themselves. While the Turkish soldiers remained outside the city, the Tartars massacred the Armenian population. The deep-rooted animosity between the two ethnic groups had been unleashed in the collapse of Tsarist authority over the previous year. Earlier atrocities committed by the Armenians only fueled the Tartar community's desire for vengeance. An orgy of destruction, including murder, rape, and widespread looting, consumed the city. Those Armenians and Russians who survived these horrible events understandably blamed Dunsterforce for abandoning them. However, it is doubtful that the continued presence of British troops would have saved Baku from its destruction. It is more likely that they would have shared the fate of the city's inhabitants⁷⁸.

Nor was that the only tragedy in the final days of Dunsterforce's operations. The Assyrian, Armenian, and Nestorian communities collected around Lake Urumiah were forced to make an epic retreat while constantly harassed by swarms of Ottoman Cavalry and Kurdish irregulars. Only the brave actions of the small element of Dunsterforce accompanying this column saved it from destruction.

Following the successful evacuation, Marshall relieved Dunsterville and disbanded Dunsterforce, replacing it with a more conventional task force known as the Northern Persia (NORPER) force. Although unappreciated at the time, Dunsterforce had achieved remarkable successes. It had stabilized Northwest Persia, secured the eastern flank of the British in Mesopotamia, ensured control of the Caspian sea, and denied the oil of Baku from the Central Powers during the critical final months of the war.

⁷⁸ For another perspective see Arslanian.

After the war, the British returned to Baku from Enzeli, a port city first seized by Dunsterforce. The British subsequently attempted to control the Caucasus in an ambitious attempt to create a new sphere of British influence around its prized Indian possession. These ambitious goals floundered in a morass of ethnic conflict and the resurgence of Turkey and the Soviet Union. Ultimately, a Soviet Red Army would reassert Russian dominance in the region. This domination lasted until the end of the Cold War. The collapse of the Soviet Union led to the independence of the modern states of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. The geographic boundaries and ethnic makeup of these countries closely resemble that of their forefathers born in the chaos of the Russian Revolution and the final year of the First World War.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

I sometimes used to ponder over the Caucasian peasant, contentedly playing his pipe or droning his praises to God as he sat by the wayside in peaceful contemplation of his sheep. He had no fears but of hunger or cold. Was it true that only by acceptance of our democratic ideals he could insure himself against these evils? Must we disturb him? And when we have roused him, washed him, given him a vote and taught him indoor sanitation, did he contribute more to life than when calmly contemplating sheep? I wonder.¹

— Ranald MacDonell, *And Nothing Long*

Analysis

Military campaigns with ambiguous strategic results are rarely studied as examples of operational art. It is more comforting, but misleading, to hold up as examples of operational art, exalted clear-cut strategic victories. That is unfortunate. Ambiguity is more likely when operating in the complex environments for which we are told to prepare.

The campaign of Dunsterforce in Northwest Persia and the Caucasus presents the modern student of war with just such ambiguity. Dunsterforce's campaign ended with its withdrawal from the city it was defending, the relief of its commander, and the massacre of the people who chose to ally with it. Unsurprisingly, many historians, especially those influenced by the writing of the MEF commander, view the campaign as a failure.

Such judgments fail to consider the outsized strategic effects of Dunsterforce on the First World War. In addition, they have too often precluded a discussion on

¹ MacDonell, 326.

Dunsterville's operational approach. It is in this innovative approach, with the limited means provided to him, that one can discern lessons for today and the future.

The strategic situation at the beginning of 1918 presented British policy makers with a significant dilemma. Years of costly attritional warfare had exhausted the manpower reserves of the country. Those British forces available were needed for the expected struggle on the Western Front. Yet the Russian Revolution had led to the collapse of the Eastern Front. Anarchy in Russia rekindled the ambitions of the Central Powers to control the natural resources of the Caucasus, extend Ottoman control over its Turkic brethren in the region, and threaten British dominance in South Asia. The British conceived of a small handpicked force to counter this threat. This force, Dunsterforce, was meant to train and advise the people of the Caucasus in the path of the Ottoman offensive.

Therein lay the genesis of the issues that would plague Dunsterforce throughout the campaign. Dunsterforce itself took time to be mobilized, and the pace of change in the region quickly outstripped the ability of the small task force to achieve its original objectives. The bewildering political transformations in the Caucasus had completely altered the balance of power in the region. Initial British attempts to influence this complex situation had unintended consequences. When British funds to support a resistance were provided first to the Armenians, it further alienated the Tartars who joined the Ottomans. With no immediate significant British military presence in the Caucasus to defeat the Ottomans, the Georgians sought an alliance with Germany. Divisions amongst the Caucasian people and the social upheaval emanating from the Russian Revolution fatally weakened the formation of a disciplined indigenous force able

to resist the Central Powers. No matter how elite the men of Dunsterforce were, alone they could not overcome the absence of will of those they were meant to partner with. Only the presence of large conventional British units could have achieved the most ambitious goals of British policymakers.

Despite these limitations, Dunsterforce proved adept at achieving most of its objectives. While the main body of British troops was blocked and could not enter the Caucasus, other British agents delayed the Ottoman advance, collected intelligence, and developed local contacts to enable the arrival of Dunsterforce. Dunsterville was subsequently re-tasked with securing and stabilizing Northwest Persia. It is here that Dunsterforce achieved unqualified success. Dunsterville understood the central importance of the local population. He developed an extensive intelligence network in order to identify the interests and allegiances of the population and spent a considerable amount of time engaging key leaders to influence their behavior. At the same time, he implemented a program to combat the famine that plagued the area. These initiatives transformed a previously actively hostile population to a neutral one and helped ensure Persia did not join the Central Powers.

Yet Dunsterforce still faced the armed Jangali movement. The Jangalis blocked British access to the Caspian Sea and received support from the Central Powers. This enemy force, along with the threat of an Ottoman attack into Persia, and the difficulty in sustaining his force in a barren land could have easily overwhelmed a lesser commander. By ensuring that his famine relief program focused on road building, Dunsterville was able to improve his lines of communication. The development of intermediate fuel

dumps, mechanical shops, and airfields allowed his motorized force to operate successfully at the absolute limits of its operational reach.

Regardless, Dunsterforce ultimately needed combat power to secure Northwest Persia. The first critical step was co-opting the last remaining disciplined Russian troops, Bicherakov's Cossacks. This gave Dunsterville the time necessary to develop local security forces and engage in the endless bureaucratic struggle necessary to receive actual British soldiers. Once he had received such troops, he was able to transition from stability and defensive operations to the offensive. Using an amalgamation of Cossacks, British soldiers, and local paramilitaries, he defeated the Jangalis and established a thin screen line in North West Persia that deterred the Ottomans and secured the MEF's eastern flank.

What stands out during this campaign, is Dunsterville's unique diplomatic abilities. Using impressive interpersonal skills, he tirelessly sought out opportunities to engage the leaders of all the various factions that influenced his area of operations. This included foes, neutrals, allies, and his countrymen. Dunsterville first sent a staff officer to negotiate with Kuchik Khan before fighting him, and convinced the Bolsheviks in Baku to supply his force with needed fuel. Even when he was allied with the Armenians, he continued to meet with Tartars in a futile attempt to split them from the Ottomans. Finally, he met with British diplomats, intelligence officers, and bank officials to gain their insights on the situation and their support for his initiatives. As a result, he was able to mobilize all aspects of British national power, especially diplomatic and economic power. This is a textbook example of ensuring a whole of government approach to achieve the objectives of his military campaign.

Modern officers are trained to ensure a whole of government approach by leveraging interagency partners and seeking allies amongst the divergent actors in the area of operations. Not nearly as much emphasis is placed on the role a commander's personality plays in the success of military operations. Dunsterville was adept at building diverse coalitions with the British diplomats stationed in Iran, intelligence agents operating in the Caucasus, and the myriad of truculent actors that he was sent to assuage or mobilize.

Ironically, this skill was resented by the one man Dunsterville needed most to ensure the success of the operation-his superior. General Marshall was a veteran of earlier ambitious British offensives that ended in bloody defeats at Gallipoli and Kut. It seems clear he was a devotee of a methodical approach that ensured adequate logistical support and concentrated combat power. As such, he was bound to distrust a risky operation at the furthest end of its logistical tail that was as much political as military. This dislike only increased when British policy makers intended Dunsterforce to be an independent task force, answerable to London, but dependent on Marshall's MEF for support. So long as Dunsterforce remained independent, this animosity was manageable.

This changed after Dunsterforce's entrance to the Caucasus was blocked and he was re-tasked with securing northwest Persia under the command of Marshall. For no matter how innovative the makeup of Dunsterforce, designed to lead irregular forces, it lacked the combat power needed to accomplish its difficult mission. Marshall controlled the British conventional forces Dunsterville needed. Every success Dunsterville had in convincing British government officials in Teheran, Delhi, and London to support him seems only to have reinforced Marshall's desire to limit that support as much as possible.

Through deft bureaucratic maneuvers, Marshall hamstringed Dunsterville at the most critical moment of the campaign—the defense of Baku. He split Dunsterforce's area of operations, leaving Dunsterville with only a rump command in Baku separated from the majority of his troops in North Persia. Then he mandated that those troops in Persia stay there to defend the line of communications that were threatened by the Ottomans in Tabriz. In so doing, Marshall ensured that Baku would fall. When it did, he could conveniently fire Dunsterville since he no longer commanded any British troops in Baku and a new officer commanded the forces in Northern Persia.

In spite of Marshall's intransigence, Dunsterforce achieved remarkable strategic effects. By ensuring British access to, and control of shipping on, the Caspian Sea they effectively contained the Ottoman offensive thereby insulating British India from Pan-Islamic disturbances. By stabilizing Northwest Persia, they secured the eastern flank of the British Army in Mesopotamia. Most importantly, by delaying the Ottoman conquest of the Caucasus, they drove wedges in the Central Power alliance, dissipated Ottoman forces before the final decisive battles of Megiddo, and denied critical fuel supplies to Imperial Germany. These accomplishments are the true measure of the campaign's success.

Such strategic accomplishments and Dunsterforce's masterful withdrawal from Baku should not blind us to the human costs of British intervention in the region. For British stated objectives included the protection of those Christians in the path of an Ottoman offensive and in this, the results are much more mixed. At every opportunity, the officers of Dunsterforce attempted to save those they could. They did so, despite of the opposition of Marshall who saw such humanitarian actions as an additional burden on

a strained logistical system. However, by inspiring these local groups to resist the Ottoman offensive, they undoubtedly contributed to the severity of the ultimate retribution.

Thus will always be the price of mobilizing indigenous proxy forces in regions with intractable ethnic rivalries. While it would be easy to cast such ethnic groups as pawns in the struggles of great powers, the Dunsterforce campaign suggests a more nuanced reality. Throughout the campaign, factions, both big and small, manipulated each other and sought alliances of convenience to achieve their aims. In many cases, the greater strategic issues of the First World War were merely a pretext to attain dominance over another local rival.

After Dunsterforce was disbanded, Britain's attempts to achieve long-term objectives in the region floundered. The core interests of the regional titans- Turkey and Soviet Russia- defeated British imperial hubris after its First World War victory. This is a natural outcome for any ambitious foreign policy undertaken in regions at the farthest ends of one's operational reach that clash with the geo-strategic imperatives of local powers. This suggests that only the long-term presence of significant ground forces will consolidate the gains made at the expense of regional hegemons.

Insights

The Dunsterforce campaign suggests certain insights into the prosecution of modern armed conflict. The successes achieved by Dunsterforce were in large part due to the innovative use of all elements of national power. The British were especially adept at exploiting all the diplomatic and economic resources available to accomplish their mission. This use of national power included mobilizing individuals with access to, and

knowledge of, the area of operations. Whether they were Persian businessmen in England, Russian Tsarist refugees, or a Scottish businessman and part time diplomat living in Baku like MacDonell, the British Army happily commissioned them. Dunsterville subsequently depended on these individuals for critical tasks where other more conventional Army officers would have arguably been hopeless.

In fact, the selection of the right individuals for a mission is a recurrent theme throughout the campaign. Those British planners who conceived of Dunsterforce placed special emphasis on selecting troops with the right character, experiences, language skills, special knowledge, and esprit de corps. No one better exemplifies this than the commander of the expedition. In the ongoing debate of the relative importance between training and education, Dunsterville's example presents a strong argument on behalf of education. The British Army's decision to send Dunsterville to learn Russian as a young officer combined with his operational experiences in India and China, and his innate interpersonal skills led to huge dividends many years later in North Persia and the Caucasus.

Conversely, Dunsterforce also highlights the critical need of significant ground combat power to achieve one's objectives. In spite of the noteworthy skill and bravery of the original members of Dunsterforce, major combat operations required conventional British infantry formations. It was the unheralded riflemen of the Hampshire, Gurkha, and North Staffordshire regiments who fought house to house to clear Resht, patrolled the forested Jangali heartland, and died repulsing the Ottoman assault on the Mud Volcano. The limited availability of such troops undermined the campaign. The superior discipline,

organization, and training of the British could not be matched by the indigenous forces meant to bear the brunt of the fighting.

This is only natural when one considers the sheer complexity of the political situation. Shifting allegiances, revolutionary forces, and ethnic rivalry enfeebled the establishment of an effective local resistance. The British learned then, and we continue to learn today, that you cannot want something more than the people you are purportedly sent to help. In addition, ethnic conflicts and blood feuds are always more real to the local inhabitants than the geopolitical agendas of great powers. In those instances, when the interests of both parties converge, intelligent and charismatic leaders can muster the power of indigenous forces. However, enlisting local ethnic minorities in irregular warfare has repercussions. Rival groups will target these minorities for their alliance with outside powers.

Today, the U.S. Military is preparing to counter “hybrid war.” While the name itself is new, the form of warfare it defines is ancient. States will always use all elements of national power, including and beyond purely military means, to achieve their objectives. In fact, the proper combination of diplomatic, informational, military, and economic means is the acme of a good strategy. This will sometimes include the use and mobilization of irregular forces with shared grievances or histories. The U.S. is uniquely vulnerable to this form of war. Our future oriented society rarely understands or respects the long narrative of ancient peoples who have survived prolonged conflict.

Hence modern diplomats and soldiers must have a deep knowledge of the history of the region in which they must operate. Today, the Caucasus remains an arena of competition. In the spring of 2016, troops from Azerbaijan and Armenia fought over

disputed territory.² A true understanding of the current conflict is impossible without an awareness of the violent origins of both countries.

Furthermore, the core geopolitical interests of regional states will generally outlast the fleeting focus of greater powers. Russia and Turkey, regardless of their latest political incarnation, continue to shape the geostrategic environment in the Caucasus. Germany and Britain, on the other hand, have long lost interest and influence in the region. The United States would do well to remember such fundamentals of statecraft.

The operations of Dunsterforce also reinforce the timeless importance of establishing clear objectives and ensuring unity of command in the successful execution of operations. Conflicting guidance from higher headquarters and disagreement between the British commander in Mesopotamia and British political masters in London made an already difficult task almost impossible.

Finally, in spite of such difficulties, the strategic situation may dictate the need to execute similar missions in the future. Such campaigns, if executed skillfully, can contribute to the successful achievement of greater political and military objectives. They should not be undertaken lightly.

Summary

Dunsterforce achieved its military objective to delay the capture of Baku's oil fields by the Central Powers and stabilize Northwest Persia. These accomplishments had strategic effects on the outcome of the war that far exceeded the limited British means provided. On the other hand, the limited means available ensured the campaign ended

² Mariam Harutyunyan and Emil Guliyev, "Azerbaijan, Armenia forces clash as Putin urges ceasefire," *Agence France Presse* (AFP), 2 April 2016.

with ambiguous results. Furthermore, Britain failed to achieve its larger political objectives to strengthen the ethnic groups in Caucasia in order to deny the strategic region to both the Ottomans and Bolsheviks.

So long as military forces are asked to achieve ambitious objectives with limited means in complex situations, the results will be, at best, ambiguous. Forewarned and educated, those brave and intelligent individuals tasked with achieving such objectives can seek out innovative solutions and broad coalitions with those groups that share their interests. If they are knowledgeable of the power dynamics in the area in which they operate, they will be able to further their country's goals at the very limit of complexity.

GLOSSARY

Area of operations. An operational area defined by the joint force commander for land and maritime forces that should be large enough to accomplish their missions and protect their forces.

Campaign. A series of related major operations aimed at achieving strategic and operational objectives within a given time and space.

Center of Gravity. The source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action or will to act.

Combat power. The total means of destructive, constructive, and information capabilities that a military unit or formation can apply at a given time.

Insurgency. The organized use of subversion and violence to seize, nullify, or challenge political control of a region. Insurgency can also refer to the group itself.

Line of communication. A route, either land, water, and/or air, which connects an operating military force with a base of operations and along which supplies and military forces move.

Line of effort. A line that links multiple tasks using the logic of purpose rather than geographical reference to focus efforts toward establishing operational and strategic conditions.

Line of operation. A line that defines the directional orientation of a force in time and space in relation to the enemy and links the force with its base of operations and objectives.

Local security. A security task that includes low-level security activities conducted near a unit to prevent surprise by the enemy.

Mass. Mass the effects of overwhelming combat power at the decisive place and time. Synchronizing all the elements of combat power where they will have decisive effect on an enemy force in a short period of time is to achieve mass.

Operational approach. A description of broad actions the force must take to transform current conditions into those desired at end state.

Operational Art. The cognitive approach by commanders and staffs- supported by their skill, knowledge, experience, creativity, and judgment-to develop strategies, campaigns, and operations to organize and employ military forces by integrating ends, ways, and means.

Operational environment. A composite of the conditions, circumstances, and influence that affect the employment of capabilities and bear on the decisions of the commander.

Secure. A tactical mission task that involves preventing a unit, facility, or geographical location from being damaged or destroyed as a result of enemy action.

Seize. A tactical mission task that involves taking possession of a designated area using overwhelming force.

Unity of Command. The operation of all forces under a single responsible commander who has the requisite authority to direct and employ those forces in pursuit of a common purpose.

APPENDIX A
AREA OF OPERATIONS



Source: Created by Sven Hoogerheide, concept by author.

APPENDIX B

TIMELINE



Source: Created by Sven Hoogerheide, concept by author.

APPENDIX C

DUNSTERFORCE ORDER OF THE DAY, No. 1.



DUNSTERFORCE ORDER OF THE DAY,

No. 1.

BY

Major-General L. C. DUNSTERVILLE, C. B., Commanding Dunsterforce.

To the British Officers and Non-Commissioned Officers of Dunsterforce.

It is with great regret that I sever my connection with the gallant members of the Force I have Commanded under very peculiar circumstances during the past nine months.

The original destination of the Force was the Southern Caucasus, but owing to various causes that destination was never reached. The Force remained in Persia until August, 1918, when a portion reached Baku and took part in operations there, which came to an end with the evacuation on September 14th, 1918. The remainder of the Force was employed in various parts of Persia and Kurdistan, where they had the honour of being the first British Troops to operate in those regions.

The work carried out by the members of the Force has varied from valuable administrative tasks to daring achievements in the battle-field and all have striven to do their utmost even in spheres of work for which they were never prepared and which they would never have chosen for themselves. Officers and N. C. Os. have been called on to superintend famine relief work, to assist in road construction, to police towns, to drill and instruct Levies and Armenian Troops, and to lend a ready hand in many tasks that were not in themselves congenial.

Apart from any Military results achieved, the members of the Force have had the proud privilege of showing the various races in the lands through which they pass, the pattern of the finest Army of the present times; the effect of their demeanour and behaviour has been such as to enhance the reputation of the British Race in the eyes of all with whom they had dealings.

Mirza Kuchik Khan, the leader of the Gilanis with whom we fought at Resht in July, has stated that he fears the British more than any other European Race because their methods are such as to call forth the admiration even of their enemies. Against other foes he can rely upon stirring up some desire for vengeance or retaliation, but against the British he fails to rouse any feeling at all.

I am prouder of my Command of the gallant Officers and N. C. Os. of Dunsterforce, than of any other Command I have ever held or am likely to hold. Brought together from every corner of the Empire, all have vied with each other to show the absolute unity of our national aspirations, and our determination to win in this great war of the representatives of Freedom against the powers of Autocracy and Militarism.

I wish each individual member of Dunsterforce everything good in the future and happy memories of this far-away theatre of the great war.

BAGHDAD,
October 1st, 1918.

L. C. DUNSTERVILLE,
Major-General.

S.G.P.B. 1652..2684...200...12-11-18.

Source: Imperial War Museum, London, United Kingdom. Made by Dunsterville, L.C. 1 October 1918, IWM (73192-1).

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