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BRITISH v. RUSSIAN POLICY

It would be wrong to say that Labor is unaware of the dilemma of a ruling power in a colonial empire. A recent directive of the Colonial Secretary warning "colonial governments against bureaucratic planning" and inviting them "to arouse the interest and secure the cooperation of the peoples concerned" shows that this is not the case. But it is one thing to say this and quite another to put it into practice. The problem is one of techniques and personnel: the whole system of indirect rule, which works through, and hence supports, dominant native groups with a vested interest in the status quo, would have to be thrown overboard; and the overwhelmingly conservative colonial service, which is steeped in traditions of paternalism and white supremacy, would have to be purged and renewed. These issues could not even be seriously broached without arousing bitter social antagonisms both in the colonies and at home. Labor apparently wants no trial of strength with the powerful interests which have long dominated and profited from the empire. As long as this is so, British administration will remain what Empire, the journal of the Fabian Colonial Bureau, admits it still is "in the eyes of many people in the colonies, a resented alien domination, irrespective of what party is in power at home."

It is generally known that the Soviet Union inherited from Czarist Russia a vast colonial empire in the Near East, Central Asia and the Far East. Not very much good literature exists on these regions, however, and the information about developments since the beginning of the war is particularly scanty. We are, therefore, lucky to have a relatively recent account of conditions in Soviet Central Asia from a qualified observer who is familiar with conditions in the British Empire and who cannot be suspected of undue attachment to the communist view of things. During the winter of 1944-45, Colonel C. E. Ponsonby, Parliamentary Secretary to Anthony Eden in the late Coalition Government, visited the Soviet Republics of Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. (Colonel Ponsonby is a Tory who has long been prominent in East African affairs.) In May, 1945, he addressed a joint meeting of the Royal Empire and Royal African Societies on the subject of "African Colonial Administration," and, at the suggestion of the chairman, Lord Hailey, prefaced his talk with an account of conditions in Uzbekistan. His remarks, as reported in United Empire (organ of the Royal Empire Society), are worth quoting at some length:

Twenty-one years ago the Emir of Uzbekistan (who held his territories under the Czar), in fear of the reprisals by his poor people, who existed only for the purpose of taxation, with 20 of his chief followers galloped away to Afghanistan, where he subsequently died. Today one of his sons is in a technical institute and another a teacher in Moscow. Twenty-one years ago

the literacy in Uzbekistan was seven percent, practically the only teaching being in the Mohammedan schools, and very few women could write at all. There were only one or two small irrigation schemes on the Czar's estates -- there were no factories and no hydroelectric plants. What is the situation after 21 years? Now 98 percent of the population can read and write; there are 4,000 schools, two universities and several technical institutes; there are large efficient factories; huge irrigation schemes; 20 hydroelectric plants; and, amongst other things, a wonderful ballet and opera....

How has this transformation come about? How have these leisure-loving Asiatic people been galvanized into activity; become teachers, engineers, technicians, and above all become, in the first place, enthusiastic for their Republic of Uzbekistan, and in the second place, ardent adherents of the USSR? I think that the answer is that firstly, they have found security; secondly, they realize the advantage of attachment to a regime which has brought them material prosperity, not so very great, but undreamed of twenty-one years ago; a regime which they can rely on to supply advice or expert personnel on technical subjects, and also finance for big schemes which they cannot afford themselves.

But Moscow has shown great wisdom. It has emphasized that this Republic can leave the USSR if it so desires; that these people are Uzbeks first and Russians second, and that they are responsible for their own development; but by means of a government-controlled radio and press; by control of cropping and production in factories, Uzbekistan is welded into the machine as an integral part of the main USSR.

It would be a mistake to assume that Soviet policy toward the problems of backward peoples is primarily a matter of ideology or sentiment. It stems rather from the fact that the Bolsheviks in their own struggle to gain and hold power were obliged to ally themselves with all the elements in Czarist Russia which stood to gain from the liquidation of the ancien regime. It was inevitable that when this common struggle succeeded, new people should come to power with new values and new standards. Their interests were not in the sort of differential gain which gives rise to racial discrimination and the one-sided exploitation of undeveloped areas; on the contrary, their interests called for the strengthening of the new social order through cooperation among different races and through the maximum development of available productive resources. This point hardly needs emphasis today since the experience of the war; what does need stressing, however, is that social habits and attitudes of mind generated in intense experience over a period of years become a part of a people's "nature." The astonishing progress which Colonel Ponsonby witnessed in Uzbekistan was thus the

"natural," indeed the inevitable, outcome of the genesis and make-up of the USSR.

THE USSR AS A MODEL

In the long run, countries, like individuals, are judged by their record. From the point of view of the colonial countries, the record of the USSR stands in a class by itself; and it seems reasonable to suppose that both those which enjoy nominal independence and those which comprise parts of colonial empires -- not least the British -- will be increasingly attracted to the USSR. This does not mean, of course, that they will want to join the USSR, but it does mean that they will want governments which can understand and profit from Soviet experience; that they will want to receive assistance from the USSR; that they will insist upon the freedom to adopt those institutional forms and techniques which have already proved their worth in overcoming the obstacles to rapid economic and social progress. So far, this is a trend which is only beginning to become evident, but it may well be one of the decisive historical trends of our time. Britons, even of the Left, will greet it with mixed feelings since they cannot escape the fact that their own position and well-being are to a considerable extent based on inherited privileges which are being irrevocably undermined. Americans, on the other hand, being more fortunate in this respect, should welcome it. Our own historical experience does not give us any special expertness in colonial economics, and in the matter of race relations we obviously have more to learn than to teach. We can afford to lend generous financial and technical assistance, but as a nation we should be glad to have the recipients of our aid call in such help and advice as they may require and organize themselves in a way to derive the maximum benefit.

All this may sound like nonsense, or perhaps worse, to those who see in colonies and backward nations only pawns in a game of "power politics" and who close their eyes to the facts that real people are concerned and that no policy which ignores their needs and aspirations can in the long run be successful. Such an attitude is no doubt partly due to ignorance; colonial governments customarily impose a curtain of censorship compared to which the famous Churchillian "iron curtain" is transparent and flimsy. But in times like the present, ignorance is no excuse, least of all for persons in high places. Everyone knows in a general way what has been going on since the war in Indonesia and the Far East, and corroborating evidence from Africa is not lacking -- e.g., the International Labor Review for May-June of this year, reporting on labor conditions in the Belgian Congo, describes a strike movement which began in 1941 and led to violent clashes in which there were "many victims," and quotes from an official document the following significant conclusion: "The indigenous proletariat, manual and intellectual, is following with interest

and almost with passion the social evolution that is taking place .... The Africans are following closely what is being said and written among us in French Equatorial Africa and elsewhere, and are making their demands more and more explicit."

THE IRANIAN AFFAIR

Unhappily for the American people, the present administration in Washington seems to be unable or unwilling to read these signs of the times. The Iranian affair of last spring is an excellent case in point. Iran has close historical and cultural ties with the neighboring Soviet Republics. So far as the USSR is concerned, its primary interest is in having a friendly Iran covering a vital stretch of its southern frontier, which is obviously impossible so long as the country is under the thumb of a ruling class whose sympathies and outlook are similar to those of the former Emir of Uzbekistan, referred to by Colonel Ponsonby in the passage quoted above. On the other side, one must assume that the mass of Iranian peasants and workers are at least to some degree familiar with what has been accomplished north of the border and that a desire to share in this material and cultural advance would be strong, especially among the literate minority. In short, the installation of an Iranian regime friendly to the USSR and both able and willing to borrow from the creative experience of the Soviet Central Asian Republics would appear to be a common interest of the Soviet and Iranian peoples.

In the past, there has been no opportunity for such a regime; but during the war the Soviet occupation authorities in northern Iran permitted a progressive government to come to power in the Iranian province of Azerbaijan and protected it against the armies of the central government. Naturally, the Russians were reluctant to leave the country without assurances that this government would not be cut to pieces the minute they were across the border. With good will on the part of the American and British governments, the Iranians would almost certainly have given such assurances; the evacuation of Iran would have taken place on schedule; the affair would have been amicably settled in the interests of the peoples concerned and quickly forgotten; the only losers would have been the semi-feudal Iranian aristocracy. Instead, as is by now well known, the American government chose to use the situation to create an international crisis of dangerous proportions, to embitter the relations of the Big Three and to throw a monkey wrench into the workings of the United Nations. In short, the American people, through their government, were ranged squarely on the side of reaction and against the interests of the colonial peoples of the world.

Unhappily, there are plenty of signs that, behind a smokescreen of distorted facts and high-sounding phrases, the same thing is happening in China, Korea, the Philippines and other parts

of the world. The tragedy is the more profound because American policy and American achievements during the war brought this country unparalleled prestige among the colonial peoples. The name of Franklin D. Roosevelt became a shining symbol of freedom among the humble and downtrodden everywhere. Now, a year and a half after his death, these same people are seeing American power, from which they had expected so much, being used to bolster up the very system of domination and exploitation which has kept them for so long in enforced poverty and ignorance.

THE GOAL IS SELF-DETERMINATION

It would be impossible, within the space of a short article, to enter into the many problems with respect to the present and future of the British Empire which are raised by the foregoing analysis. Nevertheless, a few points seem reasonably clear. In so far as the Labor Government has stepped up the pace of reform in the colonies, it deserves the support of American progressive opinion. At the same time, however, it should be clear that self-determination of the colonial peoples themselves -- which does not necessarily mean separate nationhood for each and every colony, and still less independence under the rule of a small European minority on the South African pattern -- should remain the ultimate goal. There is nothing in past history, or in the recent actions of the Labor Government, to suggest that genuine equality and cooperation among the races that comprise the British Empire can be organized from London. And, finally, Americans should be on guard against all efforts, especially on the part of their own government, to freeze the various units of the empire into some sort of anti-Soviet power bloc. Quite aside from the general international dangers of such a course, it is clear that it could lead only to disaster for the colonial peoples themselves.