

OLAF CAROLIE

# FOREIGN AFFAIRS

AN AMERICAN QUARTERLY REVIEW



OCTOBER  
1953

VOL. 32 NO. 1

\$1.50 A COPY

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Published quarterly by Council on Foreign Relations, Inc. Printed at 10 McGovern Ave., Lancaster, Pa. Editorial and Business Offices, 58 East 68 Street, New York 21, N. Y. Cable address, Foraffairs, New York. Subscriptions, \$6.00 a year, post free to any address. The Editors will consider manuscripts submitted, but assume no responsibility regarding them.

# SOVIET COLONIALISM IN CENTRAL ASIA

*By Sir Olaf Caroe*

**A**LMOST in the center of Asia, and far removed from the oceans, are two great basins of continental land, once the home of a civilization rivalling that of Cairo or Cordova, and even today an extension of the Moslem East. They were known until recent times as Russian and Chinese Turkestan. Both are ringed round by some of the world's highest mountains, and where the mountains stop the plains fade into desert or inland sea; both are traversed by rivers which do not reach the ocean; both are inhabited in the main by people in whom a Turkish strain may be said to predominate. To distinguish these Transcaspians from the Turks of Turkey and the Caucasus it is convenient to speak of them in general as the Eastern, or Central Asian, Turks.<sup>1</sup>

More specifically, those of Turkish stock living in the U.S.S.R. are divided into Kazaks, Uzbeks, Turkmens, Kirghiz and Karakalpaks; the Kazaks and Kirghiz overlap into China, where there are also Turkis or Taranchis. There are also the Tajiks, of Iranian stock and language. Turkmens, Uzbeks and Tajiks all overlap into Afghanistan, and the first into Iran also. All except the Tajiks speak one or other form of Turkic language, the Tajiks a form of Persian. A confused history has led to much crossing of stocks, and it may be said that the people in the settled area south of the steppe—the old Transoxiana—represent a mingled Turco-Iranian heritage, of which bilingualism in Turkic and Persian—common among Uzbeks and Tajiks—is one indication. The Iranian strain predominates in the towns and the settled oases along the rivers, while the Turkish strain, often infused with Mongol blood, is more common upon the steppe and in the mountains.

The two parts of Turkestan are divided by the great mountain transept culminating on the Pamirs, from which spring several of the biggest ranges of the world. In a general way this water-shed, linking the Tianshan with the Hindu Kush and Karakoram mountains, is also the political frontier between Russian Turkestan and the Chinese Turki dominion known as Sinkiang.

The curtain fell on Central Asia long before the days of Soviet rule, even before the Tsars. The fanatical exclusiveness of the Bukhara Emirs and *ulema* (priesthood) made of that city a legend remote from ordinary life. The seclusion of Samarkand was even more striking. According to the American Consul Schuyler, from the time of Clavijo who went there in 1404 on an embassy to Tamerlane from the King of Spain, until the journey of Khanikov in 1841, Samarkand saw no Europeans but two chance Russians—two visits in more than 400 years. No wonder that it had a halo of romance and piqued the curiosity of the Western World.

It was therefore not surprising that the Russian capture of Tashkent in

<sup>1</sup> It would be convenient to refer to them as *Turkis*. But Turcologists tend to confine this name to those living in China.

1865, of Samarkand three years later, and of Khiva in 1873 should have caused a stir. Now at last, it was thought, the mysteries of these magic cities would be unveiled. But no; the Tsar's Government consistently looked with irritation upon intrusions into its Asiatic territories and kept a strict hand on all the controls. There was always something to conceal, a rebellion, a massacre, an advance not to be avowed. One aspect of the Tsarist conquest calls for particular remark. It was achieved by methods of pitiless violence. The darling of the army, a political idol whom it was blasphemy to criticize, was Skobelev, a leader in the capture of Khiva and Farghana, and later the general who overcame the gallant Turkmen resistance at Gök Tepe.

I hold it a principle [he said] that in Asia the duration of peace is in direct proportion to the slaughter you inflict upon the enemy. Strike hard and keep on striking till resistance ends, then form ranks, cease slaughter and be kind to the prostrate enemy.

In a prophetic passage Curzon claims Skobelev as typical of the Russian nation, poised with one foot in the past of Chingiz Khan and another advancing into a new world of ideas and action. Indeed, he was not a meteor only; he was the lodestar of a creed destined to sway many worshippers.

For concentrated historical or contemporary thought on Russian Central Asia in English it is necessary to go back at least 50 years, and it is not easy to uncover modern sources of real value. The gap must be filled from Russia and Turkey. In respect of one period—the uneasy interlude of 1917–24 between the Revolutions and the consolidation of Soviet power—there is interesting material from the pens of leaders of Turkish stock with a Russian education superimposed on their Moslem upbringing, men who for a short time themselves figured as founders of independent national states. These have left memorials in writing, suggestive of what their peoples may yet achieve if history turns in their favor. In Russian there is a large body of real scholarship, often tendentious but always painstaking, as well as the usual statistics backed by much panegyric in Soviet publications and press. Soviet publicity, so sedulous to replace the old with new, is apt to give prominence unwittingly to the old things it would uproot. The stream of exhortation, coupled with vituperation directed at the “deviationists,” is itself evidence of a fear that there is yet life in peoples who for hundreds of years had their own pride, their own distinctive civilization, and their own foundations of belief. Sometimes, too, an even brighter illumination proceeds from the statements and admissions of the Kremlin, and particularly of Stalin himself.

In the thirteenth century this Turkestan was the near-center of Chingiz Khan's Empire. Chingiz with his four sons, in an age of horse transport, established across Asia and Europe the vastest continental empire ever known until it was rivaled by the empire of the Russians and their satellites seven centuries later. Like Russia, the Mongol power stretched from China to beyond the Black Sea; the Mongol threat, like Russia today, overhung both Western Europe and the Indian peninsula. To us, and viewed in the perspective of time, the Mongols seem to have come and gone in a fleeting moment, so that historians are accustomed to speak of their rule as a passing phenomenon. But in their passing they threw on the screen a shadow premonitory of a dominion which was to be as extensive in bounds and as lacking

in mercy as their own. So too the new Eurasian empire, as dependent as that of the Mongols on singleness of aim within a small and jealous palace clique, may prove to be as ephemeral as theirs.

## II

The October Revolution was scarcely over when there appeared over the names of Lenin and (even so early) of Stalin the famous Declaration of Rights, with its special appeal to the peoples of Colonial Russia:

The Council of Peoples' Commissars has decided to base its work in relation to the nationalities of Russia on the following principles:

1. The equality and sovereignty of the nations of Russia;
2. The right of the nations of Russia to free self-determination, including the right to secede and form independent states. . . .

Three weeks later a manifesto was issued addressed to "all toiling Moslems in Russia and the East," adjuring "all those whose mosques and prayer-houses were destroyed, and religion and customs trampled upon, to build up their faith and customs and to enter on a national life freely and unhindered." This would read oddly in *Pravda* today. It was not surprising that the autonomists of Asia believed a Golden Age had dawned.

The same doctrine of liberty, with right of secession, is proclaimed as the Soviet gospel for export today. The phrase "freedom for colonial peoples" remains on Communist lips as an open sesame, promising access to a new world where the lion and the lamb lie down together. But in fact, at least until Stalin's death, the very word nationalism has been one of the unholy things, and every conceivable pressure has been applied to overcome separatism in the colonial territories of the Soviet Empire. How, then, can the practice be reconciled with the platitude of the theory?

The answer begins to appear if we examine certain particulars distinguishing Soviet Central Asia from other parts of the world which from time to time have been regarded as dependencies. The first distinction is that the peoples of what may be called the metropolitan race in the U.S.S.R.—the Great Russians—have an absolute majority over all other races in the Union, and at the last census constituted 58 percent of the total population. Great Russians and Ukrainians made up exactly three-quarters of the total, while the two most important Asian stocks, the Uzbeks and Kazaks, together amounted to less than 5 percent of the population. There is thus an enormous preponderance of European over Asian population in the Union, and it follows that in areas suitable for European colonization there are no such problems as beset the Commonwealth in Africa, and France south of the Mediterranean.

The next point is this. Central Asia is a part of the same continent with European Russia; one passes into the other with easy gradations of climate, soil and population. Indeed the Russians are only doing today in Central Asia what they did from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries on the Volga steppe and in the Urals; just as they then flooded over and mingled with the Turco-Tatar population in Europe, so now they gradually pervade and submerge the Turkish population of the Kazak steppe and Transoxiana. The process is the same, the interaction further to the east—that is all. The

process is the easier in that, broadly speaking, the whole of inhabited Central Asia is possible terrain for European colonization. Indeed much of it has a more clement climate than any part of Russia proper, the Crimea perhaps excepted. This process, started by the Tsars, has continued in Soviet times, with the result that in many parts Russians have now completely displaced the indigenous peasantry.

An even more important distinction is to be found in the fact that until the "proletarianization" of the nomads under the First and Second Five-Year Plans (1928-37), there was in Central Asia no organized indigenous urban proletariat. There was, of course, a city population of merchants, traders, craftsmen and *religieux*, but it was the usual medley, following the guild system to be found in the bazaar quarters of all eastern towns. Such factories as existed in early days were staffed by Russians, and Russians alone were to be found on railways and telegraphs. Industry and communications were in Russian hands. As Stalin himself said: "The fact of the matter is that a number of peoples, mainly Turkic—about 30,000,000 in all—have not had time to pass through the period of industrial capitalism and consequently have no industrial proletariat." And two years later he added:

The conditions now exist enabling those republics which possess no proletariat to establish *with the aid of the Russian proletariat* their own centers of industry in order to create in these centers groups of local proletarians who will serve as a bridge between the Russian proletarians and the toilers of these republics.<sup>2</sup>

This interpenetration of the Central Asian peoples by a Russian peasantry in the countryside, and by a Russian proletariat in the towns and along lines of communication, supplies the most important clue to an understanding of the realities of the colonial policy of Soviet Russia. It is seldom mentioned; indeed Stalin's reference to the bridge-building task of the Russian proletariat is the nearest we get to an admission of the facts. But from the beginning its existence made nonsense of the high-sounding phrases of the 1917 Declaration and ensured for Russians a dominating position, not as sojourners like the English in India, but as permanent settlers.

During the interregnum of 1918 to 1924, at least three autonomous states were set up within Turkestan—Kokand (in Farghana), Bukhara, and Alash Orda (on the Kazak steppe). After a short period all were shattered by the Red Army and there was no hesitation in the use of Skobelev's methods where resistance was met. When the dust settled, the movements for local autonomy were dispersed, and the way was open for the abolition of the old principalities of Bukhara and Khiva—maintained as vassals under the Tsars—and the rationalization of the colonial provinces over the whole field. This took place in several stages; here there is room only to record that the boundaries of the five constituent Republics finally emerging in 1936 were ostensibly fixed in accord with national principle modified by economic considerations. These five are Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kirghizia and Turkmenia, with Karakalpakistan an "Autonomous" S.S.R. within Uzbekis-

<sup>2</sup> Speeches to the 10th and 12th Congress of the Communist Party, March 10, 1921, and April 23, 1923, "Marxism and the National and Colonial Question." London: 1942, p. 104 and 156.

tan. Their total population in 1939—the last Soviet census—was nearly 17,000,000, of whom at that date there remained only some 11,000,000 of indigenous stock. The total area is larger than India before partition, and more than half the size of the United States. Stalin claimed that this delimitation of frontiers offered an excellent example of how the Soviets can be brought into closer touch with the masses. The time had come, he said, when scattered fragments could be reunited into independent states.

The map belies him. The territories are inextricably tangled. The boundaries do not even divide language-groups, and they cut across irrigation systems. The natural unit of the Farghana Valley is gerrymandered into three parts, distributed among Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kirghizia. Pretty



enough on a map, these convolutions are evidence of a policy of cantonization, conceived with the object of confusing ideas of local unity, and bringing the *disjecta membra* under the influence of stronger forces of assimilation from without. The impression is strengthened by the development of a language policy which first in the twenties substituted a Roman for an Arabic alphabet, and ten years later a Cyrillic for a Roman, in both cases differing slightly for each language-group. These changes emphasized the differences of the various Turkic languages and facilitated the adoption of Russian words and phrases. And there was a motive of a more subtle kind—the realization that change upon change in the medium of education must tend to sever the generations one from another and help to usher in a new age.

## III

So much for fact set against fancy. But it remains to see in what way the directors of policy were able even in their own minds to reconcile their 1917 professions of "freedom for all" with the developments which actually took place. In examining this question it is necessary to look first for some statement of doctrine conceived as regulating policy. The particular task will be easier if we bear in mind Stalin's own saying that at the outset *the indigenous peoples of Asia possessed no proletariat*. And it is safest to go for the answer to the Soviet sacred books themselves.

The general principle of the right of secession is not only to be found in the 1917 Declaration, but is enshrined in Article 17 of the 1936 Constitution. Let it pass, outside the U.S.S.R., for a liberal aspiration: it has never been suggested that any Republic in the Union really possesses the sovereign power entitling it, for instance, to be neutral in a war, much less to secede, and local nationalisms have been crushed by force. But this gets us no nearer to understanding how the actual outcome can be seen by any mind as harmonizing with the principle. Two citations<sup>3</sup> from Stalin's own speeches (to which others could be added) point the way within the shrine:

Nations have the right to preserve any of their national institutions but that does not mean that the Party will not combat and agitate against the pernicious institutions of nations. On the contrary it is the Party's duty to conduct such agitation.

There are instances when the right of self-determination comes into conflict with the other, the higher right. In such cases, this must be said bluntly, the right of self-determination cannot and must not serve as an obstacle to the exercise by the working class of its right to dictatorship. The former must give way to the latter.

Here then is the Doctrine of the Proletariat, overriding the right to secede, and applied to "native nationalists" (who have no proletariat of their own) by a Russian proletariat working through the Party. In more recent years this doctrine has been reinforced by another, known to Soviet writers as the Doctrine of the Lesser Evil. (The sacerdotal flavor of Stalinist thought is always interesting.) This dogma runs as follows. Oppressive though the Tsarist régime may have been, it was less evil than the alternative then open to non-Russian nationalities, namely, annexation by a rival empire. And oppressive though Tsarist capitalism may have been, it led the annexed Moslem peoples away from feudalism through capitalism along the only road to Socialism, and was therefore a lesser evil than a continued independence. It is an extension backwards into history of the sort of reasoning from first principles which earlier enabled Stalin to justify to his own satisfaction the crushing of any separatist nationalism by means of the Doctrine of the Proletariat. Both dogmas are shafts aimed at one target—the native nationalists, who, if they believed in historical dialectics at all, wished to develop them within the framework of a national and not a Great Russian consciousness. The difference is that the newer doctrine makes it no longer even respectable to take pride in national resistance to the Tsarist conqueror. Great Russia in all her incarnations is declared unassailable.

For an understanding of the pressures which the execution of these theories

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 53, 163.

brought to bear upon the men and women of Central Asia, it is necessary to look to the objectives of the Five-Year Plans. If a short definition may be attempted, it would be that these aimed at the rapid industrialization of the country by means of the redeployment of labor. The human fodder for mines and factories was to be found by the collectivization of agriculture and the suppression of nomadism, so hard to reach and so obnoxious to all centralized control. Later, the period of World War II saw a large increase in Central Asian production of coal, oil and heavy industry under the spur of war needs and the evacuation of industry from Europe. And all the time, in pursuance of policies inaugurated by the Tsars, a steady increase took place in the numbers of European settlers in the land, synchronizing with an even larger reduction in the indigenous population, more particularly upon the steppe. The dry facts of Soviet statistics themselves establish that between the census of 1926 and that of 1939 the Kazak population on the steppe was reduced by 21.9 percent, when on normal expectations for the U.S.S.R. as a whole it should have increased by 15.9 percent. In short, one Kazak out of three perished during this period, a process which is only to be described by the new term genocide.

To grasp the situation facing the Soviet planners on the steppe and in the more remote glens, it is necessary to have some insight into the meaning of Central Asian nomadism. It takes two forms, that of the spreading open steppe, and that of moving with the season to the mountains. The first form is not unlike the nomadism of the Bedouin in the Arabian desert, where the owners of flocks and herds have to move many miles in pursuit of the grass that follows a precarious snow or rainfall. The second form is common to countries where high mountains stand over deep valleys, and climate changes in a journey of a few hours, or at most a day or two. In Farghana and the Tajik valleys, for instance, heat in summer is fierce and the lower lands burnt brown. But a short journey leads the herdsman to flowery alps, where his flocks can pasture at their ease. In the same country in winter, when the alps are under snow, the outskirts of the hills afford a clement refuge and good pastures. Some part of an accustomed range suffices for the animals throughout the year.

In this way the tribes of the steppe and the tribes of the mountains had roamed for centuries, free-born and untrammled, meeting with rivalry only from their own kind if they overstepped their limits. The way of their life implied that they were here today and gone tomorrow, and it was not easy for authority to control or tax them. Up to the first Five-Year Plan (1929) the old loyalties to chief and elder, the old observances of tribal formula and prohibition, the old laws of hospitality were still in force. It was this system the Soviets determined to break up.

The job was done not by redistribution of land, as in cultivated areas, but by indiscriminate rounding up of the nomads with their animals. It was this that led to the death of one in three of the herdsmen and of nearly three-quarters of the herds. Nor is the story yet complete. The current Soviet press is full of complaints of the failure of stock-breeding programs. All note that plans are not being fulfilled, and a search for scapegoats is continual. Every reason is given except the true one, namely, failure to learn the art of animal management. In these regions, whether in the semi-desert of the steppe or in

the sharp contrast of mountain and glen, with all the variations of season and altitude, there exists a stage where it is hard, if not impossible, for men and animals to survive, unless they adapt themselves to a migratory life. These pastures do not produce long grass suitable for winter feed, and the irrigated fields, on which it could be grown, are needed for grain and cash crops. In other words, the right economic system for stockraising in this climate is a form of nomadism. And there is another and more subtle reason for the failure. The bond between herdsman and herd is close, for all animals have their idiosyncracies. The world of animals cannot be regulated simply according to theories of heredity and environment. It is hard for a mechanized system to grasp the thought of the shepherd who leaves the ninety-and-nine sheep in the wilderness to search for the one that is lost and, when he has found it, brings it home on his shoulders, rejoicing. But that is the secret of success with livestock; the animal is an individualist, and gives of its best in response to gentleness and care.

Behind all doctrine in Central Asia, and enforcing each pressure against any form of individualism, stood always the Party (to paraphrase Stalin), unitary in content, federal only in form, a solid structure bound in the strictest discipline to a central command and controlled from the apex at Moscow. It has often been described as a monolith; it is more like a banyan tree whose branches spread from the central trunk and return to earth, sending up fresh trunks all of the same species as the central trunk, killing all other growth in the lands which they reach. Party missionaries went forth from this center to spread the gospel and fight nationalism as Stalin had decreed. In such a conflict the local nationalists had no chance. Every force that can be thought of was applied to overcome any centrifugal impulse in this colonial Empire. The power derived from the presence of a large Russian resident population, a universal ideology, a regimented education, collectivization, centralized industrialization, mass transfer and slaughter of populations, the mechanization of the inner springs of life, all these forces are to hand and have all been used.

#### IV

What, then, is left of an old civilization, of a pride which more than once inspired movements carrying the ancestors of these men to the banks of the Danube and the Ganges? Is all submerged beneath a flood, turgid like the Oxus, unpredictable in its attack but bearing down the landmarks till all is flat and even and the last resistance overcome? Surely, apart from the break-up of tyranny itself, the only factor which can upset material pressures of this order is the existence, in the face of all power and indoctrination, of an inner spirit which refuses the idea of the mechanization of man.

We have already observed that the exhortations of the Soviet press and platform make plain that "deviations" exist. Whenever "ideological-creative" work slackens—so the jargon runs—there emerge insubordination, "bourgeois-nationalistic tendencies" and, worst of all, "religious survivalism" among the youth. And, indeed, there is a certain afflatus of the Turkish spirit which seems to make the Turk, Western or Eastern, conscious of impulses moving him apart from other men. He proudly preserves his identity. That pride is lasting, and the Turk whose spirit has breathed over Persian and

Mongol, Anatolian and Byzantine, remains simply and invincibly himself, curiously unsullied by more complex influences around him. He is a prince of deviationists.

But there is more than that. In the emigrations from Russia after the Revolution there were many groups of exiles from Central Asia. They formed organizations, dreamed dreams, and wrote books and articles, putting forward programs for a free and united Turkestan. Before 1941, it might have been said that, like other exiles, they were old and nostalgic, out of touch with actuality in the land of their birth, and apt to contend so violently with one another that they were unable to command the attention of the outer world. But with the war hard facts broke in, in the shape of many thousands of deserters and prisoners from the Soviet armies who fell into German hands in the first months after the German attack on Russia. Many came from Central Asia and the Caucasus; from Turkestan alone some half-million men either deserted or were taken prisoner in the first year after June 1941. They were placed in prison camps under appalling conditions, and treated as brutally as the Nazis treated all prisoners from Russia. Thousands died. But of the remainder as many as 180,000 entered as volunteers into one or another formation of the Wehrmacht or the Waffen-SS, believing they fought for the liberation of their country from Soviet rule.

Fortunately for the Allied cause the Germans proved heavy-handed. And to the end of the war they were undecided about the treatment of the "minorities" from Russia who had fallen into their hands, wavering between a declaration of support for movements in seeking the establishment of independent states, or a policy aiming at incorporating these people in a new German colonial empire. Almost all officers in these formations of Turkestan troops were German, and language difficulties were great. No distinction was drawn between prisoners and deserters; they were equipped with inferior arms. The German Ministries were at odds on almost every question; only the Ost-Ministerium under Rosenberg seems to have shown any political flair for dealing with an important asset.

But in spite of all the German mistakes of principle and practice, in spite of frequent crudity of method and the German inability to give that personal touch to relations with men of another race which alone commands the devotion of Asian troops, it can be said that these Central Asian and Caucasian mercenaries served their new masters not unfaithfully to the end. They proved good soldiers, believing the liberation of their homelands a cause worth fighting for. It was noticed that, Communist or not in upbringing, the youth of Turkestan was always influenced by a national tradition inculcated in family life. This tradition, which often had a religious background and remained alive within the family, had made the youth skeptical of Communist teaching and ready to welcome those who could speak to them of what they could understand.

The Germans did not deserve to have such men to lead. They used them to serve only a German purpose; when totalitarian Germany fell, she dragged down her mercenaries with her. The path was uncharted and there was no clear direction for men who sought anxiously for a goal. In the end, most of the volunteers who did not perish were by Allied agreement handed back to

their old masters and disappeared. Cast to and fro between two tyrannical forces—Russian and German—lacking a home and refused understanding, for them the end was bitterness. Yet what happened shows at least that a strong spirit of independence had survived a quarter-century of Soviet rule and still lived in the hearts of thousands of the youth.

One great reform was introduced by the Soviets—the emancipation of women and the discarding of the veil. Against this no Central Asian nationalist will find it easy to exclaim. But it remains a question how far this measure has really weakened the more vital of the Turkish traditions, though it may have transformed them. On the steppe women were never secluded. A vivid nationalism is not seldom nurtured by women, both within and without the home, more feelingly than by fathers or schoolmen. A greater permeation of society by women may produce a higher feminine velocity, as it were, and in the end recoil on Russians who forced it on urban Moslem populations. The mothers of the volunteers of World War II had not discarded their patriotism and their Turkish ideals with their veils.

Yet if something new is indeed to emerge from the clash between Russian and Turk of Central Asia, it will not be just a resurrection of the unchanging bigotries of Bukhara, or even of the simple tribalism of the steppe. For much that is constructive and life-giving—for instance, this greater enlightenment among women—will have come in under cover of the new forces. Dead wood has been cut, and new growth achieved. Persecution purifies. There will be memories of past inspirations, but the spark that is blown by that breath to flame will not illuminate the faces of a latter-day body of *ulema*, but of men and women who have been through Soviet schools. We need not expect the products of Soviet education superimposed on the Central Asian tradition to be of the stuff of a Gandhi or a Jinnah, for, paradoxically, such men are bred only in an English forcing-house. But they may be persons in their own way no less surprising. While tyranny is in full blast, they will bide their time; when it breaks—as break it will if only under stress of inner conflict—their opportunity will come. When that time arrives, they will be well placed from their peripheral situation to make contact with the outer world. Our successors may then say that the inert mass of stratified ritual and bigotry, which represented Islam as practised in Transoxiana before the Russians came, needed the violent impact of the encounter with Communism to reanimate it and raise it to the heights of a spiritual reaction.

The great movements of history, which are in essence movements of the spirit, tend to have origin in regions such as Turkestan where ideas and civilizations overlap. It was so with Judaism, and again with Christianity and Islam; Central Asia, like India, is a region of this kind from which we may expect new forces to be set in motion in this age. It is clear that the older inspirations of the Central Asian peoples have not yet failed; there is also reason to suppose that the impact of the new has not been wholly destructive, but by a process of catalysis may bring about some renewal of life. From this meeting of old and new some offspring will surely be born. It is for the free world to forecast the delivery and nurse it when it comes.