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DUNSTERVILLE’S ADVENTURES: A REAPPRAISAL

Pathetically they [the Armenians] look upon themselves as our ally. . . . I shall be told that the Baku Armenians let down General Dunsterville and his force. How many people in England know the Armenian story of that affair?

C. E. Bechhofer [Roberts], In Denikin’s Russia and the Caucasus, 1919–1920

The fall of Baku to combined Ottoman-Azerbaijani forces on 15 September 1918 ended the British involvement in Transcaucasia during World War I and resulted in the death of thousands of Armenian civilians. The responsibility for the fall of the city has been hotly disputed since that fateful day. One view, held by General Lionel C. Dunsterville, the commander of British troops committed to the defense of Baku, blames the local forces, especially the Armenians. The Armenians were undisciplined, uncooperative, lazy, and unreliable in battle; they abandoned their positions as soon as they came under enemy fire. In short, with some exceptions, they were cowards who expected the British to do all the fighting. Under these conditions the small British contingent could not stop the enemy indefinitely. On the night of 14 September, when the local forces showed little inclination to resist a new attack, Dunsterville brought his men back to the safety of the Persian port of Enzeli, thus saving them from certain death. Another view, held by the leaders of the Baku Armenians, ascribes the fall of the city to British perfidy. These critics of British policy claim that Dunsterville did not keep his promise of a large British force for the defense of Baku. The effective British force did not exceed one thousand men and it was secretly withdrawn from the city in the heat of the battle, leaving the local troops, who were fighting valiantly, to their fate. This, the Armenians claim, was nothing less than treachery.

Western historians have relied heavily on Dunsterville’s published memoirs for their discussion of the British wartime involvement in Transcaucasia and of the Baku events in particular. They have, by and large, overlooked the Armenian view. Dunsterville’s account, however, fails to withstand a critical examination in the light of recently opened British archival sources. This essay proposes a new interpretation of the British entanglement in Baku. It places most of the responsibility for the British debacle in Baku on Dunsterville’s shoulders and gives some support to the critics of the British general.

I

The Russian revolutions of 1917 demoralized the Russian soldiers in the Caucasus and resulted in their mass exodus. In December, the British War Cabinet resolved to assist the Christian Armenians and Georgians of Transcaucasia in
equipping and training their national military formations. The Muslim Azerbajanis, the other dominant people of Transcaucasia, did not figure much in the War Cabinet discussions. The Azerbajanis, often called Tartars or Tatars by the British, were the natives of eastern Transcaucasia who spoke Azeri, a Turkic language. The British government believed that only the Christian peoples of Transcaucasia would resist the incursions of Ottoman armies into manganese- and oil-rich Transcaucasia and frustrate the Ottoman government’s Pan-Turanian policy.

The War Cabinet’s decision to thwart a probable Ottoman drive into Transcaucasia and beyond the Caspian in the direction of India assumed that British troops would not be needed. The nearest British army was the Mesopotamian Expeditionary Force, commanded by General William Marshall, which could not spare large units. Nor could large numbers of soldiers be transported in the winter via northwestern Persia and the Caspian – the only available route. London believed that with British financial aid and cadres the local population could successfully resist the enemy. The British military mission in Tiflis was instructed to help the Armenian and Georgian leaders to buy arms, ammunition, and transport and other military material to equip their national armies. London added that a group of British officers would be dispatched to organize and train the local forces. This last decision resulted in the formation of Dunsterville’s mission (Dunsterforce).

Major-General Lionel C. Dunsterville was appointed to lead the British mission of some two hundred officers and an equal number of other ranks to Tiflis. Dunsterville was a household name in England as the “Starky” of Kipling’s popular Stalky & Co. These stories were romanticized and “vastly exaggerated” versions of “petty episodes” at Westward Ho!, the public school where Kipling and Dunsterville had shared a “study” in 1886. The “Starky” character magnified the “type of exploit in which he [Dunsterville] excelled, a feat or practical joke achieved without leaving any trace by which the perpetrator could be identified.” After graduating from Sandhurst Dunsterville served in Malta, Egypt, Sudan, then was posted to India and participated in the British expedition in Peking. Dunsterville, however, failed to attain the military fame predicted by Kipling for him at Westward Ho!

By some mischance he had missed, not only the campaigns in Burma, Egypt, and South Africa in which the successful generals had made their names, but also the more spectacular events in the campaigns on the Indian frontier. He had seen much hard service with his Sikhs but not in affairs which caught the public eye. Perhaps, too, peculiar talents which impressed the other boys in Number Five Study at Westward Ho! were not so much esteemed by the bureaucrats in Simla and Whitehall.

The outbreak of the war found Dunsterville in England, retired from his command of the Sikh battalion on a meager pension. Having no influential friends in the government, he could not obtain a prestigious command on the Western Front. He was eventually posted, as a brigadier, to India. His knowledge of Russian and Persian was probably instrumental in his appointment as the head of the British mission to Transcaucasia at the end of 1917. Here was the much
sought-after opportunity – maybe the final one – for him to make a name for himself as a leader of men in battle.

Dunsterville arrived in Baghdad in mid-January 1918. As the new head of the military mission in Tiflis and British representative in the Caucasus, he was to proceed to Tiflis to organize the local forces. The Transcaucasian situation, however, was extremely complicated. Transcaucasia was governed by the Commissariat, a regional executive composed of Georgian, Armenian, and Azerbaijani representatives. While refusing to recognize the new Bolshevik regime in Russia, the Commissariat insisted that Transcaucasia was “an integral unit of the (nonexistent) Russian democracy.” This fictional tie to Russia was finally broken with the establishment of the Transcaucasian Federative Republic when the Commissariat was forced to enter peace negotiations with the victorious Turks in the late spring of 1918. The authority of both the Commissariat and the Transcaucasian Federative Republic was rejected by Baku. Until March 1918, however, no single national, religious, political, or military organization was in control of the city. One organization that claimed supreme authority was the Baku soviet, which recognized the new Bolshevik regime in Petrograd. The Bolsheviks, however, were a minority in the soviet. The acquiescence of Social Revolutionaries and Armenians enabled the Bolsheviks to dominate the soviet’s executive committee, chaired by Stepan Shahumian – the Bolshevik regime’s Extraordinary Commissar for Caucasian Affairs. The major rival of the soviet was the city duma which represented the Baku capitalists and bourgeoisie. It enjoyed the support of the Mensheviks, Kadets, and a very small section of local Armenians and Azerbaijanis. However, the soviet had its Red Guards while the duma had no military force. Nevertheless, the soviet did not monopolize power in Baku. The majority of some 95,000 Azerbaijani inhabitants of the city held themselves aloof from both the soviet and the duma. They had their own military formations, which were under the control of the Muslim national council. Still, the strongest local armed force belonged to the Armenians. The Armenian national council, in spite of its general support of the soviet, refused to relinquish its control of the Armenian units and merge them with the Red Guards. In early 1918, these three separate military formations – the Red Guards, the Azerbaijani militia, and the Armenian units – shared power in Baku. Barring intervention by an outside force, this stalemate could only be broken by a coalition between two of these formations against the third. That did not happen until late March.8

Dunsterville’s first task was to cross the 650 miles between Baghdad and Enzeli, there to embark his men for Baku, and thence to Tiflis. Reaching Enzeli was itself no mean task. The road was in bad repair; some sections were unsuitable for mechanized transportation. Winter snowstorms plagued travelers. The road also had problems of another nature. The Jengalis of the Gilan province in northwestern Persia controlled the final seventy miles. Their leader Mirza Kuchik Khan had vowed to clear his country of foreigners and he was in open rebellion against the weak Tehran government. It was thus possible that the Jengalis would oppose the Dunsterforce’s passage through Gilan.9 Furthermore, beyond the Jengalis were the Bolshevik Committee of Enzeli and the
Baku soviet. While the Bolsheviks were only an influential minority on the executive committee of the Baku soviet, they completely controlled Enzeli. The Bolshevik government of Russia was then negotiating a settlement with the Central Powers at Brest-Litovsk. As the Bolsheviks of Enzeli and Baku were under direct orders from the Sovnarkom (Council of People’s Commissars), it was possible they would not condone continued British activities in Transcaucasia, and thus not allow the Dunsterforce to reach its destination.

Dunsterville realized the difficulties facing him, but he had to reach Tiflis in the shortest possible time. Accordingly, he did not wait for the full formation of his mission and left Baghdad for Enzeli on 27 January. He took with him a dozen officers, some forty Ford vans, and “a considerable weight of money in Persian silver and English gold,” which he had brought with him to Mesopotamia. Dunsterville dispatched Captain (later Major) G. M. Goldsmith, with a Kurdish interpreter, to reconnoiter the road. Goldsmith obtained Kuchik Khan’s promise of safe passage for the Dunsterforce through Gilan and then proceeded via Enzeli to Baku.

Dunsterville braved bad weather and terrible road conditions before arriving in Enzeli on 17 February. His own memoir is the only detailed published source of what took place at Enzeli. According to this account, the local Bolshevik committee informed him it knew his mission’s objectives, and that it had been instructed by the “Bolshevik” Baku soviet to prevent at all costs the Dunsterforce’s arrival in Transcaucasia. Russia, now out of the war, opposed the British policy of prolonging hostilities against the Turks in Transcaucasia. Dunsterville was also informed that his mission could embark for Baku only if it converted to Bolshevism and put itself under orders of the Baku soviet. Dunsterville found these terms unacceptable. He was confident he could seize a steamer and force his way to Baku, but he also realized that such effort would be pointless, since it would deliver his mission into the hands of the Baku “Bolsheviks.” He believed the longer the mission remained in Enzeli, the greater was the risk of capture by local forces. He decided to fall back. The chairman of the local committee suggested that the mission stay one extra day to await further information from Baku, but Dunsterforce left Enzeli early in the morning of 20 February. Dunsterville claims that the next day he learned that a strong detachment of Red Guards from Baku had arrived to capture his mission moments after his departure.

Dunsterville’s account of his first attempt to reach Baku invites reassessment. His allegation that a Bolshevik force from Baku had arrived at Enzeli to capture his mission moments after its departure does not withstand a logical examination. The Enzeli Committee was in direct telegraphic communication with Baku. Thus, had a force from Baku planned to capture the Dunsterforce, the Enzeli Bolsheviks would have denied Dunsterville the petrol necessary to return to Hamadan, forcing the Dunsterforce to remain in Enzeli and to become easy prey for the Baku soldiers. Dunsterville did not mention in his dispatches to London and Baghdad the news of the arrival of Baku soldiers to capture his force. The war diaries of the headquarters of his mission, too, are silent on this event.
Had Dunsterville remained a day or two longer in Enzeli, he might have been able to proceed to Baku and from there to Tiflis. Goldsmith reports that upon hearing from Dunsterville about his difficulties at Enzeli he took the matter to Stepan Shahumian whose authority extended over the Bolshevik Committee of Enzeli.\(^4\) Shahumian guaranteed the British mission’s safe passage through Baku to Tiflis, but the telegram informing Dunsterville of this “did not reach Dunsterforce in time as General Dunsterville had returned to Hamadan.”\(^5\) Shahumian might have been disposed, at least for the moment, to let the British organize the Armenian and Georgian forces because the outcome of the negotiations at Brest-Litovsk was still uncertain.\(^6\) Moreover, he might have realized the potential danger of the Turkish offensive to the survival of the Armenians of Transcaucasia and the Baku soviet.

Whatever chances Dunsterville had to reach Tiflis were dashed soon after his arrival in Hamadan. The road to Baghdad and the alternative route to Transcaucasia via Tabriz were impassable. Moreover, his failure to establish telegraphic communications with Tiflis left him out of touch with Transcaucasian developments.\(^7\) In March the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty was finally signed. At the end of the month, a clash between the Red Guards of the Baku soviet and the armed Azerbaijani population of the city developed into racial and religious warfare when the Armenian military units, the strongest local force, joined the Bolsheviks. The Armenians, who regarded the Muslim Azerbaijans as the Turks’ allies, turned the battle in favor of the Red Guards. About three thousand Azerbaijanis were killed. The “March Days” convinced the Azerbaijans that only with Turkish help could they gain control of their city. More importantly, the defeat of the Azerbaijans was followed by establishment of soviet authority in Baku. Supported by the Armenians and Social Revolutionaries, Shahumian abolished the city duma and closed down opposition newspapers of Baku. These successes increased the influence of the Bolshevik minority in the soviet. Having committed itself to the support of the soviet, the Armenian national council was forced by the insistence of the Bolsheviks to integrate most of the Armenian units with the Red Guards. On April 25, the soviet passed a resolution which established a Council of People’s Commissars (Sovnarkom) in Baku. Thus, although still a minority, the Bolsheviks inaugurated soviet rule in the city. In the ensuing months the Baku Sovnarkom proposed, and the soviet adopted, many socialist resolutions, such as nationalization of banks and the oil industry.\(^8\) Now that the Bolsheviks had a strong foothold in Baku, and Russia was out of the war, Shahumian could not justify a policy of cooperation with the British in opposition to Moscow’s official stand.\(^9\)

II

After Dunsterforce’s failure to reach Tiflis in February, the British government gave up the plan to send officers to train the Armenians and Georgians. It was realized that a much stronger British force than the one under Dunsterville’s command was needed to break the Bolshevik stranglehold on Enzeli and to overcome the possible opposition of the Baku soviet to the passage of a British mission to Tiflis. General Marshall claimed that he could not spare men from
his command to strengthen the Dunsterforce. Dunsterville was instructed to stay in Hamadan and to devote his energies to raising volunteers from among the local population and retreating Russian soldiers. It was hoped that his force would be able to prevent the penetration of enemy agents into northwestern Persia.\textsuperscript{20} The War Cabinet gave up the policy of maintaining the Caucasus front. The course of events in Transcaucasia in the spring of 1918 led the War Office to conclude that the end of Transcaucasian resistance was "near and inevitable."\textsuperscript{21}

The War Office premonitions did materialize. Despite the formation of the Transcaucasian Federative Republic, the local nationalities did not cooperate. Thus, the Ottoman offensive did not encounter serious resistance. The Georgians, Azerbaijanis, and Armenians declared their independence in May to sign separate peace treaties with the Ottoman government. The Georgians, taking advantage of Turkish-German rivalry for the control of Transcaucasia, obtained Germany’s protection and prevented the Turks from imposing harsh peace terms. The leaders of Azerbaijan, who sympathized with Ottoman Pan-Turanian policy, asked for Turkish assistance to destroy the Baku Soviet and make the city the capital of their new republic. The Armenians, who had done most of the fighting against the Turks, failed to receive German protection and were forced to make humiliating territorial and military concessions to the enemy. In early June the combined Turkish-Azerbaijani forces began marching on Baku.

At this juncture the British government was still unwilling to assist in the defense of Baku. London’s attention was turned to the task of preventing a Turkish advance further eastward into Persia and Transcaucasia. It was hoped that this goal could be attained by strengthening Dunsterville’s northwestern Persian cordon and by obtaining control of the Caspian. The Dunsterforce, however, did not have the necessary troops to hold the gap of some 400 miles created by the withdrawal of the Russians. Dunsterville’s efforts to recruit some of these Russian soldiers were not very successful. Only Colonel Lazar Bicherakhov agreed to keep his detachment of 1,200 Cossacks in Persia until the arrival of British reinforcements from Mesopotamia. But help from General Marshall was not forthcoming.\textsuperscript{22}

Marshall had his own ideas about containing the Turkish danger. London’s decision to bring northern Persia and the Caspian under British command made no sense to him. Marshall’s arguments went beyond questions of logistics and lack of manpower; he doubted the validity of the assumption underlying this policy. He did not believe that the enemy was seriously contemplating a military offensive into Transcaucasia and northwestern Persia or planning a Pan-Islamic uprising against the British rule in India. These were mere bogies created by enemy propaganda and by the imagination of the British officials sitting in Tehran, London, and Simla. Even if he were proven wrong, Marshall thought that it would be military madness to follow the Turks to these farfetched places with undersstrength British units. He claimed that the best policy was to attack the Mosul district with all his available forces and knock the Turks out of the war in a single blow.\textsuperscript{23}
In the face of Marshall’s and the British government’s opposition to any sort of British military involvement in Transcaucasia and Persia, Dunsterville kept the Baku situation on the agenda of the Eastern Committee in London. His efforts were supported by Ranald MacDonell, the British Vice-Consul in Baku who was an ardent advocate of British intervention. In May MacDonell informed London that at least one British officer was required in Baku to consolidate those elements which were friendly to Britain. Dunsterville proposed to dispatch some of his officers to Baku to destroy the oil fields and to secure the Caspian fleet stationed there. The Eastern Committee, eager to deny the enemy the oil resources and the means of transporting troops to Transcaucasia, instructed Dunsterville to initiate his plans at the opportune moment. This authorization was given despite the fact that the Eastern Committee was unclear how a handful of British officers would accomplish such a feat. Dunsterville was asked to explain.

The Eastern Committee’s request for further information remained unanswered. Several days later Dunsterville, who had moved north from Hamadan to Kazvin, suggested a new line of action. He had concluded, after conferring with envoys from the Baku Armenians, that a small British contingent could help Baku to keep out the larger Turko-Azerbaijani forces and thereby save the oil fields. All he wanted was permission to send the armored car column (then on its way to him from Baghdad) and Bicherakhov’s detachment to Baku. For reasons that remain obscure, Marshall agreed with Dunsterville’s new proposal. On 5 June, the Eastern Committee permitted Dunsterville to begin preparations for the dispatch of the motorized column to Baku. Such a move, however, had to await the establishment of British control over northwestern Persia and further instructions from London.

Dunsterville was aware, his contrary assurances to the Eastern Committee notwithstanding, that a small British force could not save Baku from imminent Turkish conquest. In May he wrote from Hamadan:

The Baku situation is obscure. It is separate from the Caucasus question generally. At present the Armenian colony there and the Bolsheviks are holding out against the Caucasus-Islam Army – The Georgians of Tiflis, who heartily dislike the Armenians, offer no help. How can we help them in any way that would hold out a chance of success? It appears to me quite impossible. Troops alone could restore order – and we have no troops. A few officers, a few armoured cars and liberal finance would not turn the tide; in fact such an effort would probably add fuel to the flames.

The situation continued to deteriorate after this assessment was made. Nevertheless, Dunsterville wired the Eastern Committee that with the aid of a small British force Baku could successfully resist the Turkish armies. He probably intentionally underestimated the size of the British force needed to defend Baku in order to overcome the opposition of Marshall and the Eastern Committee to large-scale commitments in that region. He might have calculated that the Eastern Committee, after agreeing to send a British force, however small, to Baku, would have no other choice but to accede to later demands for more troops. Thus, on obtaining authorization to prepare for embarking the armored
column to Baku, he requested to add an infantry battalion and a battery of field artillery. Dunsterville resorted to the same tactic on a later occasion to force the Eastern Committee to assume commitments it had rejected previously.

The Eastern Committee discussed Dunsterville’s new plan on 11 June. General Macdonogh, the D.M.I. (Director of Military Intelligence, War Office), resolutely opposed it arguing that Dunsterville’s manpower estimates were unrealistic. The Georgian and Armenian resistance had collapsed, the Germans were landing troops at the Georgian port of Poti, and two Turkish regiments were en route to Baku. ‘‘General Macdonogh said that he thought either General Dunsterville had not been kept fully informed or else he had not quite grasped the situation. It was ridiculous to send a small force and the armoured-car squadron to Baku.’’ Concurring in this view the Eastern Committee informed Marshall that Dunsterville was to dispatch only a few officers to destroy the Baku oil reservoirs and acquire the Caspian fleet. Even assurances of military assistance to the defenders of Baku were deemed ‘‘inexpedient and dangerous.’’

Thus, in mid-June, the Eastern Committee reverted to its position of May. Once again its attention turned from the defense of Baku to the question of preventing the penetration of Germans and Turks farther east. Accordingly, Marshall was directed to reinforce the Dunsterforce to enable the latter to strengthen its hold on northern Persia, and to facilitate its task of bringing the Caspian under British control. It was also made clear to Baghdad that in order to carry out these tasks Dunsterville would need more than a few companies of troops. At the end of the month Marshall gave in. He informed the War Office that, in addition to the armored car column, he would send an artillery brigade and an infantry brigade to North Persia.

Dunsterville did not reconcile himself to the Eastern Committee’s decision. He held firmly that it would be impossible to control the Caspian without controlling Baku. He persisted in attempts to reconvert London to this view. In defiance of the Eastern Committee warnings that assurances of assistance to Baku were ‘‘inexpedient and dangerous,’’ he continued to discuss with Bicherakhow and the representatives of the Baku Armenians at Kazvin plans to aid Baku. In the meantime, MacDonell plotted to replace the Baku Sovnarkom with a pro-British regime. Soon, Dunsterville received the opportunity to implement his plans.

The Turks and Azerbaijanis daily advanced closer to Baku. But the Moscow regime was unable to expedite effective aid to Shahumian. It could only send a cavalry force of about 170 men from Astrakhan and, at the end of July, a detachment of 780 infantry, along with some artillery, from Central Russia under the command of Georgii K. Petrov. The Armenian population of the city had realized the futility of Shahumian’s efforts to obtain substantial Russian assistance. They became restive and more insistent upon inviting Bicherakhow and the British. In order to obtain a foothold in the Caucasus, Bicherakhow informed the Baku soviet he was willing to embrace Bolscavism and relieve the city with his regiment. Shahumian accepted this offer after some hesitation and much doubt about the ulterior motives of Bicherakhow. Dunsterville hoped, notwithstanding warnings that Bicherakhow could not be relied upon, that the
Cossacks would defend Baku until the arrival of the British force. Bicherakhov and his men embarked on 3 July for Alyat, a port some 35 miles south of Baku, and he was given the command of the Red Army.

Following Bicherakhov’s departure from Enzeli, Dunsterville (who had attached five of his officers and four armored cars to the Cossack force) stepped up his efforts to convince Baghdad of the feasibility of holding Baku with a relatively small British force. The moment was opportune. Marshall was on leave in India, with Major-General H. D. Fanshawe acting as his deputy in Baghdad. On 18 July Dunsterville paid a short visit to Baghdad. There is no record of his conversations with Fanshawe. But, from the latter’s telegram to London it appears that a timely report from MacDonell to Mesopotamia buttressed Dunsterville’s case. MacDonell argued that the majority of Baku’s population were willing to invite the British in, contrary to the wishes of the local Bolsheviks. He also added that Bicherakhov’s agents in the city estimated that three British battalions would keep it from falling to the enemy. Fanshawe was convinced. He informed the War Office that he had decided to authorize Dunsterville to take up to two battalions of infantry to Baku.

The Eastern Committee and the War Office were in no position to question Fanshawe’s judgment. Their repeated demands to Dunsterville for information about the situation in Enzeli, Baku, and the Caspian had no results. At Kazvin technical difficulties interrupted Dunsterville’s communications with the outside for some time. When he reached Enzeli in early July, he stopped transmitting information for reasons of security. All communications were controlled by the same Bolshevik committee which had frustrated his first attempt to reach Baku. Dunsterville, however, refused to overthrow the Enzeli Bolsheviks, fearing that such a move would compromise Bicherakhov’s position in Baku. Consequently, London was left out of touch with the ever changing political and military situation in north Persia and Baku. Under these conditions, London decided to defer to Fanshawe’s opinion. On 20 July the War Office replied to Baghdad that “though their information regarding Baku and the Caucasus was too fragmentary for them to form a clear idea of the situation, they concurred in General Fanshawe’s action in sending one or two battalions, a battery and armored cars to Alyat.” The War Office stipulated that Dunsterville himself should accompany the troops to Baku. At last, Dunsterville had his way.

In a matter of days Dunsterville put his plans to work. In the absence of Russian reinforcements, the approaching Turkish armies increased the disposition of the majority of the non-Muslim and anti-Bolshevik elements of Baku to turn to the British. These forces succeeded in narrowly passing a resolution at the Baku soviet meeting of 25 July to ask for British aid. The Bolshevik members of the Baku government retaliated by resigning. On 31 July the Centro-Caspian Dictatorship, a coalition of Armenian nationalists, Russian Social Revolutionaries and Mensheviks, replaced the Baku soviet. The members of the new government had been in close touch with Dunsterville for some time and had agreed with him on a common line of action. Thus, the British role in bringing about the downfall of the Baku soviet was a significant one. One of the first acts
of the Centro-Caspian Dictatorship was to ask for British assistance.\textsuperscript{47} This request was promptly accepted by Dunsterville. The first British contingents reached Baku on 4 August.

III

The British troops stayed in Baku for only forty-two days. They failed to prevent the fall of the city and its oil wells. Even before the embarkation of the first British troops for Baku gloomy news reached Dunsterville’s headquarters. A report by Bicherakhov, dated 26 July, informed that the morale of local troops was low and that the local inhabitants did not believe that they could hold out without assistance. More importantly, while Bicherakhov encouraged the early arrival of British troops, he also warned that on their arrival he would take his force to the northern Caucasus to join his brother, who was fighting Bolsheviks in the Terek region, and to supply foodstuff to Baku from that region.\textsuperscript{48} In the face of a renewed Turkish attack, however, Bicherakhov left for the northern Caucasus on 29 July and warned Dunsterville against going to Baku as it would soon be “in enemy hands.”\textsuperscript{49} Dunsterville had misjudged Bicherakhov. Nevertheless, against all warnings, he followed up his original plan, notwithstanding the fact that his troops would not even close the gap left by Bicherakhov’s withdrawal.

Dunsterville held Bicherakhov’s abandonment of Baku as being partly responsible for the failure of his mission.\textsuperscript{50} But he placed most of the blame on the local, especially Armenian, forces. They were accused of being undisciplined, uncooperative, lazy, and unreliable in battle. In short, they were cowards who expected the British to do all their fighting and abandoned their positions as soon as they came under enemy fire. The war diaries of Dunsterville reinforce these accusations. The entry for 31 August 1918 reads:

> The present state of affairs in the defences [of the city] is quiet [sic] impossible. The Russian and Armenian Troops are quite unreliable and leave the line if shelled to the extent of only a few shells and bolt for the Town. This continually exposes the flanks of the very hard pressed British Troops here and . . . something [has to be] done to remedy [the situation] and stop the cowardly behavior of the Armenian Battalions. The Russians are very little better. . . . The Local Battalions march out of line and return to Town whenever they feel inclined leaving large gaps in the line and the British flanks exposed. A few good Russian troops are of great assistance and assist in working and digging. The Armenians refuse to work, taking the great majority, and also refuse to defend their town, leaving the British troops to bear the brunt of a very serious [and] dangerous position. The town of Baku is full of able bodied armed men who could be used in the line but apparently do not intend to go now that British Troops have arrived. The British troops are hard pressed, cheerful and fighting with the utmost gallantry but until the people of the town and local levies are organized the situation will continue as serious as it is now.\textsuperscript{51}

The war diaries of Dunsterville are replete with similar accusations, which have also been repeated by other British participants in these events.\textsuperscript{52}

It cannot be denied that the Baku soldiers were poorly disciplined and not well organized. While a number of them had seen military service in the Rus-
sian army, a large percentage were civilians dispatched to the front after at best haphazard training. Some units had fought under a socialist regime from which they adopted procedures which infuriated Dunsterville. In many cases they refused to obey orders without the approval of their soldiers’ committees. Moreover, the Armenians and Russians did not completely trust each other. This made it difficult for the commanders to coordinate in battle the movements of troops of different nationalities. These problems were not new and Dunsterville was informed of most of them months before he committed his troops to Baku. More importantly, despite these shortcomings, the Baku soldiers had fought the Turco-Azerbaijani forces for months without showing signs of cowardice. In fact, the enemy offensive at the end of July which caused Bicherakhov to withdraw from the city was checked by the Baku troops who counterattacked the day the first handful of British soldiers entered Baku. Their inability to pursue the retreating enemy, according to British reports, was due to their physical exhaustion and lack of ammunition.

Armenians claim that Dunsterville pledged to bring a much larger force to Baku. Sergei Melik-Yolchian, a member of the Centro-Caspian Dictatorship, states that on the night of 30 July his government received a telegram from the headquarters of Dunsterforce at Enzeli which stated that a British army of 5,000 was ready to embark for Baku. Others have made similar claims. Dunsterville insists that he made no such promises. The war diaries of Dunsterforce are silent about the telegram mentioned by Melik-Yolchian. Dunsterville claims that his most generous declaration to Baku Armenians was: “I can assure you . . . that every available man will be sent to Baku as soon as possible.” Moreover, this assurance, made in a letter dated 7 August, was qualified with the statement that “The entire defence of the town cannot be undertaken solely by the British who . . . have to maintain large armies on several different fronts, and the distance from Baghdad to Baku, with no railway, makes the maintenance of our troops a matter of some difficulty.” Dunsterville’s warning to the Armenians, however, was made almost two weeks after the Baku authorities had committed themselves to British aid. By then it was too late for them to change their mind: Bicherakhov had long since abandoned them, and the Bolshevik soldiers, whose numbers at least equaled those of the British, had either left town or refused to fight. Baku had to be satisfied with what Dunsterville could give them. Moreover, if the reliability of the Armenian or pro-Armenian sources is questioned, the whole issue boils down to the interpretation of the numerical connotations of “every available man.” While this might be a futile endeavor, from the Armenian perspective it must have meant “a lot.” After all, Dunsterville represented to them the might of the British Empire which, once committed to the defense of Baku, could surely manage to find sufficient troops to accomplish this task successfully. A British officer reported: “Tendency is for all to think Baku is saved now that the British have arrived and that no further effort is required from the inhabitants.”

There is more solid evidence, however, in support of Armenian claims that they were deliberately led to expect greater British assistance than they actually received. In the beginning of August, during the enemy offensive, Mac-
Donell was in Baku. Discovering that the city was "practically in the hands of the Turks," he made the rounds of the trenches "declaring"—in this own words—"to the soldiers of the Red Army that if they only hold the town for another two days all would be well as large British forces were on their way [my emphasis]." MacDonell admits repeating similar statements to the Baku soldiers until the arrival of the first British contingents. To the local population MacDonell—like Dunsterville—represented the British government. In view of his statements it is probable that the morale of local forces collapsed when they discovered that the number of British combatants did not exceed 1,000 men. According to an eyewitness account, "after having placed so much hope on British assistance, the defenders of Baku were so disappointed, so profoundly disillusioned, that after the battle of 17 August, the Turks could have taken Baku almost without firing a shot had they tried to do so."61

Dunsterville himself must share much of the responsibility for the failure of his mission. The War Office and Marshall had made it very clear to him that only two infantry battalions and some armored cars would be made available for the Baku operation. Thus, Dunsterville could have given a quite accurate estimate of the size of forthcoming British assistance during his negotiations with the Baku Armenians. He refused to do so. Dunsterville's behavior highlights his determination to go to Baku at any price and his conviction that once in the city he would succeed in pressuring the Eastern Committee and Marshall into providing him more troops. Unfortunately for the Baku defenders and for Dunsterville himself, the British authorities in London and Marshall in Baghdad did not prove as gullible as the Indian tribes tricked by "Stalky" in Kipling's stories.

Dunsterville began to demand additional troops soon after the first British reached the city. His tactics seemed to work—at least for a while. On 14 August the War Office granted his request for a third battalion. Nevertheless, Dunsterville's continued solicitations for more relief met the resolute opposition of Baghdad. This left him undaunted. He turned to the Baku dictators. After explaining that Baghdad was responsible for the small number of his troops, he urged them to ask for additional forces from Baghdad and London.63 He also redoubled his personal efforts to change his government's disposition. On 20 August he enumerated to Marshall the positive repercussions of the British presence in Baku and warned that withdrawal should not be contemplated because it would "end in disaster & collapse of British prestige" in the Caucasus, Transcaspia, and Persia. The stick was followed by the carrot: "Give me enough troops here and not only will Baku be permanently saved but a movement will spread over the whole of North and South Caucasus which will prove of inestimable value to Great Britain and her allies."64 When this plea proved unsuccessful, Dunsterville resorted to a different set of arguments. In a telegram of 1 September, he stated that under existing conditions Baku could not be defended. The Armenians were "negligible as a fighting force," and, in addition to British troops, there were only a thousand reliable Russian soldiers. This force was no match for the Turco-Tatar armies which numbered six thousand regulars and eight thousand irregulars, but, Baku should not be allowed to
slip out of British control. Otherwise, the Central Powers would gain its immense oil fields and the mastery over the Caspian. Moreover, Britain would also incur the "odium and disgrace of unsuccessful treachery if Baku falls." Dunsterville concluded his supplications on an intensely emotional note: "This expedition should never have been ordered if it was simply to result in placing a handful of British troops in [the] firing line where they remain without relief and if not supported faced with prospect of certain annihilation."65 Marshall remained unmoved. He transmitted, "without comment," Dunsterville's telegram to London and ordered him to evacuate Baku.66 Dunsterville responded by attacking Marshall for not having dispatched to him the promised troops — no such promise had been made — and blamed Baghdad for the Baku situation:

... The responsibility for the present situation therefore rests entirely with you and it is inconceivable that while there remains a good chance of saving it and the town you should propose the abandonment of the work at the outset.

The contrast between the loyalty and chivalry of Bicharakhoff and this attitude will utterly discredit the British Army in the eyes of all Russians. . . .67

Dunsterville's accusations infuriated the War Office. In a telegram of 9 September to Marshall, the War Office cited enough evidence to leave no doubt that it was Dunsterville alone who had stubbornly insisted on the feasibility of a small-scale expedition to Baku. Both the War Office and Baghdad had been opposed to this idea from the beginning, and that it was because of his persistent urging that they had reluctantly agreed to send him to Baku. Dunsterville is accused of having placed himself and his force in exactly the very difficulties anticipated by the War Office and Marshall. The War Office telegram adds that the military authorities in London had always questioned Dunsterville's own suitability for undertaking this expedition. The conclusion must have pleased Marshall: "The attitude or recrimination which he [Dunsterville] now adopts adds to our former misgivings and should you deem it advisable you are at full liberty as soon as the situation permits to relieve General Dunsterville from his command."68

The War Office and Marshall had decided not to commit additional troops to Baku for the sake of keeping the British prestige untarnished in that part of the world. They insisted on the safe evacuation of Dunsterforce to Enzeli. Dunsterville's gamble had failed. He had no other choice but to obey orders. He had already warned the Baku government that he might withdraw and advised them to surrender the city in view of the hopelessness of the situation. The Centro-Caspian Dictatorship retorted that after having committed his force to the defense of the city he could not abandon it at will. Later, the Baku dictators threatened to open fire on his troops if he attempted to withdraw them unilaterally.69 Undaunted by these threats Dunsterville made his move soon after the anticipated major enemy offensive began in the early morning of 14 September. British troops were surreptitiously removed from the front in small groups and put on board three ships which lifted anchor the same night. Dunsterville claims that he took his decision after realizing that the town could not hold and
that he obtained the permission of some members of the Baku government to leave town. Baku Armenians contradict Dunsterville. They claim that the town could have held much longer and that Dunsterforce treacherously left Baku without warning the local government. It is impossible to validate either claim. Two facts are uncontestable: Dunsterville’s ships were fired upon by Baku guns and the local troops continued to fight until the following day. Then, the Centro-Caspian government too abandoned the city along with about half the city’s Armenian population. The Tatar irregulars and the local Muslims plundered the Christian quarters of the city and killed thousands of Armenians. According to a Foreign Office memorandum ‘some 15,000 Armenians of both sexes and all ages were butchered in retaliation for the massacre of Moslems in March.’ On 16 September the regular Ottoman troops took possession of Baku and stopped the bloodshed.

The British casualties were ‘180 killed, wounded and missing.’ Dunsterville reported that the expedition had cost the British government ‘nothing.’ On the contrary, the government had done rather well by his reckoning. Dunsterforce was fed by the Baku government, he had borrowed money from the same source and had not returned it, he had ‘purchased several hundred thousand gallons of petrol sent to Persia’ without paying for it, and he had kept three steamers while in Baku without paying ‘for the hire or the cost of fuel.’ Dunsterville added: ‘After expending ammunition for six weeks in the firing line, owing to a fortunate discovery in the Local Arsenal, I came away from Baku with more ammunition than I took, more machine guns and more Lewis guns.’

Dunsterville’s fortune was not as good after the Baku episode. He was immediately relieved of his command and sent back to India. The following year the War Office vetoed suggestions to appoint him the Chief of the Anglo-Persian Military Commission arguing that he did not possess ‘the necessary qualifications.’ He was a persona non grata to the War Office. The reasons for the War Office attitude are not difficult to guess: he was insubordinate, lacked good judgment, and blamed others for his failures. More importantly, as pointed out by a high-ranking Foreign Office official, Dunsterville had ‘always failed.’ Military historians support the War Office assessment that the Baku operation was badly conceived and was doomed to failure. Dunsterforce was too little and too late to save the city. Thus, Dunsterville endangered the lives of his men in a futile effort and gave false hopes to the Baku defenders. The War Office, however, supported Dunsterville in public. In a written communication to British papers – including the *Times*, *Daily Express*, and *Daily Mirror* – it attributed Dunsterforce’s failure to the cowardice and betrayal of Baku Armenians who were accused of secretly negotiating the surrender of the town to the Turks. Dunsterville retired from the service ‘on a small pension, with no private means and no employment.’ He devoted the rest of his life to writing his memoirs, organizing the Kipling Society, and cashing in ‘on his reminiscences of Rudyard Kipling.’
NOTES

Author's Note. An abridged version of this essay was presented at a symposium sponsored by the Society for Armenian Studies at the Twelfth Annual Meeting of the Middle East Studies Association of North America, in Ann Arbor, Michigan, 9–11 November 1978.


5 Ibid., p. 334.

6 Ibid., pp. 334–345.


10 Dunsterville, p. 12.

11 "S. Russia: Report from Major G. M. Goldsmith, British Military Agent, Army of Caucasus [Cau milage] 1918 August–1919 June" (hereafter cited as Goldsmith’s report), W.O. 95/4960. This report, written in London in July 1919, gives hitherto unavailable information about the activities of the British military mission in Transcaucasia, and about Dunsterville's first attempt to reach Tiflis in February 1918. As it was written without the aid of most of Goldsmith’s notes, papers, and diaries, the dates and figures mentioned in it are not necessarily exact.

12 Dunsterville, pp. 44–49, 54.

13 See the entries for the months of February and March in General Staff, British Caucasus Military Mission: Dunsterforce, War Diary, (hereafter cited as Dunsterforce: War Diary). These diaries are uncataloged and filed under the general category of "War Diaries (Army HQ, India), Persia, 1918," at the India Office Library, London.

14 This interview could not have taken place prior to 20 February. Shahumian, who was in Tiflis for a while conducting subversive political activities against the Transcaucasian Commissariat, returned to Baku at this date. See Kh. H. Barseghian, Stepan Shahumian: Kianki ev gordsuneunet vaveragkrakan taregrutian 1878–1918 [Stepan Shahumian: Documentary Chronicle of His Life and Activities 1878–1918] (Erevan, 1968), p. 474.

15 Goldsmith’s report.

16 Goldsmith insists in his report that he repeatedly attempted to inform Dunsterville that there were no serious difficulties to the British mission’s journey via Baku to Tiflis.

17 Dunsterville, pp. 57–58, 61.


19 There are indications that on a number of occasions after the "March Days" Shahumian might have seriously considered inviting Dunsterforce to Baku. See the entry for 12 May 1918 in Dunsterforce: War Diary, and Ronald MacDonell, "... And Nothing Long" (London, 1938), pp. 210–211. It should be noted that an Allied and U.S. expedition had landed in Murmansk in North Russia "with the cooperation of the local soviet and tacit sanction of Sovnarkom" in March 1918. The final break between the Allies and the Bolshevik regime in Russia did not occur until June 1918. See


22 Dunsterville, pp. 71, 77–78; *Campaign in Mesopotamia*, IV, 117, 161–68; Sykes, II, 491–492.


24 The Eastern Committee was a War Cabinet committee established in March 1918 to shape policy in the Middle East, the Caucasus, Persia, and Central Asia.

25 Minutes, Eastern Committee 11th meeting, 31 May 1918, CAB. 27/24.

26 Ibid., *Campaign in Mesopotamia*, IV, 173.

27 Minutes, Eastern Committee 11th and 12th meetings, 31 May and 5 June 1918, CAB. 27/24.

28 Minutes, Eastern Committee 12th and 13th meetings, 5 and 11 June 1918, CAB. 27/24.

29 Dunsterville, pp. 122–123.

30 *Campaign in Mesopotamia*, IV, 179.

31 Ibid., pp. 182–183; Minutes, Eastern Committee 13th meeting, 11 June 1918, CAB. 27/24.

32 *Campaign in Mesopotamia*, IV, 182–183.

33 Ibid., p. 188.

34 Ibid., Dunsterville, p. 147.

35 Dunsterville, pp. 144–145; MacDonell, pp. 234–236.

36 Suny, p. 316.

37 Dunsterforce: War Diary, entry for 12 June 1918.


39 Dunsterforce: War Diary, entry for 27 June 1918.

40 Dunsterville, pp. 196–197.

41 *Campaign in Mesopotamia*, IV, 197–198.

42 The Eastern Committee instructed the War Office to send to Marshall a telegram of which reads: "Our information about situation both to Enzeli, Baku, and in Caspian is singularly inadequate. We have been told nothing about position of fleet or about Bicharakov’s ships... we urge you to pass upon Dunsterville imperative necessity of transmitting [to London] all information in his power." W.O. telegram to G.O.C.-in-C., Mesopotamia (repeated to C.-in-C., India), Minutes, Eastern Committee 20th meeting, 15 July 1918, CAB. 27/24. This telegram was dispatched the same day. See *Campaign in Mesopotamia*, IV, 196.

43 *Campaign in Mesopotamia*, IV, 189–190, 198, 201.

44 Ibid., pp. 198–199.

45 Dunsterforce: War Diary, entry for 22 July 1918.


47 *Campaign in Mesopotamia*, IV, 202–203; Dunsterville, pp. 207–208. See also Minutes, Eastern Committee 22nd meeting, 29 July 1918, CAB. 27/24.

48 "Appreciation of Baku Situation on 26 July by General Bicherkakov;" Dunsterforce: War Diary, appendix A for the month of July, 1918.

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from Baku in September. The war diaries of Norperforce are filed with those of Dunsterforce (see n. 13 above.)


51 Dunsterforce: War Diary, entry for 31 August 1918 (this is the diary of the 39th Infantry Brigade of Dunsterforce).


56 Korganoff, p. 199.

57 Dunsterville, p. 215.


60 R. MacDonell’s report regarding his activities from September 1917 to August 1918, Baku, 5 December 1918, F.O. 371/3657.

61 Barby. p. 216.

62 W.O. telegram to G.O.C., Mesopotamia, 9 September 1918, Milner Papers (Bodleian Library, Oxford), Box 114 (G), ff. 319–321; Campaign in Mesopotamia, IV, 230–231.


64 Force “D”: War Diary, Vol. 49, Part II, appendix 655.

65 G.H.Q., Mesopotamia telegram to C.-in-C., India (repeated to War Office and transmitting Dunsterville’s telegram of 1 September 1918), 4 September 1918, Milner Papers, Box 114 (G), ff. 311–312. For the original version of Dunsterville’s telegram see Force “D”: War Diary, Vol. 50, Part I, (1st to 15th September 1918), appendix 58.

66 Campaign in Mesopotamia, IV, 231; Marshall, 311–312.

67 Force “D”: War Diary, Vol. 50, part I (1st to 15th September 1918), appendix 363.

68 W.O. telegram to G.O.C., Mesopotamia, 9 September 1918, ibid. Dunsterville confided to Kipling that if any officer under him had written what he himself had written to the War Office and Marshall he “would have had him broken in two-twos.” See Rudyard Kipling, Something of Myself: For My Friends Known and Unknown (Garden City, 1937), pp. 31–32.


70 Ibid., pp. 297–305.


72 Dunsterville, pp. 311–312; Rawlinson, pp. 91–107; F.O. Memorandum on Events in Transcaucasia.


74 F.O. Memorandum on Events in Transcaucasia.

75 Dunsterville, p. 312.


78 Minute of Ronal Graham (acting permanent undersecretary at the Foreign Office), 29 August 1919, F.O. 37/3863, W34/122129/150/19.
79 Allen and Muratoff, pp. 485–486.
80 See the minutes of Mark Sykes and Eyre Crowe, 27 September 1918, in F.O. 37/3404, W44/160092/162647/55708/18.
81 Carrington, pp. 380–381.