

BEHIND THE SCENES IN AZERBAIJAN

BY EDWIN MULLER

LAST WEEK in a U. S. Army recon plane I flew along the southern shore of the Caspian Sea. To our left the mighty snow peaks of the Elburz Range fell abruptly to the low, swampy coast line. Along the shore ran the highroad. We watched it closely.

Presently we saw the trucks, a long line regularly spaced, moving westward. We circled over them, so low that we could see the men's faces and recognize their Russian uniforms.

Farther on we came to the port of Pahlevi. Three transports of the Russian Navy lay alongside the docks. Up the gangplank of one of them moved a file of soldiers, heavily laden. In the parking area back of the docks were trucks, tanks, anti-aircraft guns, waiting their turn to go aboard.

It was the answer to the question that we had come to seek. The Soviet Army was really evacuating Iran.

So, for the moment, ends the first great threat to the new-found peace of the world. Never again — we hope — will one of the great powers penetrate by military force and dominate one of its sovereign neighbor states.

There remains another question. What about political penetration? There are other ways of conquering a country than by armies.

Of that question Iran is still a test case. What is happening there is happening in many other parts of the world. The question in Iran is whether the autonomous province of Azerbaijan will become communist — or what?

Now for the first time it is possible to relate what has been happening in that remote but significant corner of the world.

Azerbaijan, in the northwest corner of Iran next to the Russian frontier, has a population of something over two million — there are no dependable statistics in Iran. They speak a language closely related to Turkish. Two hundred thousand of them live in the capital, Tabriz. A shabby, dusty city. One paved street, the rest cobbles or mud. Three or four movie houses where, before the war, third-run Hollywood films were shown. Bazaars with their dark, cave-like

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little shops. A few factories, cloth and leather, where the workers labor long hours in unsanitary conditions.

But most of Azerbaijan is agricultural. There are few individual farms or farmhouses such as we have. The peasant farmers live huddled in villages of a hundred up to three or four thousand. They go out each day to work in the fields.

The village of Kalivana is typical. What happened in villages all over the region happened or could have happened there. Kalivana lies in a broad, bare valley between wooded hills. Beyond you can see the rugged heights of the Savalan, snow-covered through most of the year.

In its low, thatched houses of mud brick live about 600 people. None of them own any land. The whole village and the country for several miles around belong to one man, in whose family it has been for generations. It's the feudal system which exists through Iran. The peasants aren't exactly serfs but, through high land rentals, ignorance and the lack of opportunity they are practically bound for life. Until lately they doffed their caps and bowed low whenever the master approached.

In the old days the master used to live there on the land and supervise work himself. The present owner lives in a fine house in Tehran and sends an overseer to collect the rents.

Agricultural methods haven't changed much in 1000 years. They plow with a clumsy wooden plow drawn by oxen. There's no school in

Kalivana. The nearest is in a village four miles away. Fifteen or twenty of the men can read and write, two of the women.

Sanitation hasn't yet reached the level of privies. Four out of five of those born die in infancy. Venereal disease is prevalent, though not as much so as in the city.

Economic conditions have grown rather worse through the last twenty years. The peasant must give from two-fifths to three-fifths of his produce to the landlord. What's left doesn't do much more than meet the food requirements of himself and his family. He sees very little money. The owner allows him credit for seed and other necessities. Except for the most industrious, the peasant is apt to find himself a little deeper in debt at the end of each year.

When the overseer has difficulty collecting the rent, as often happens, he calls on the gendarmes for help. These are the state constabulary. They are recruited mostly from discards from the Iranian Army. They are not at all a high type. (American advisers have begun to change this in other parts of Iran but their authority doesn't extend to Azerbaijan or other Russian-occupied territory.) They are paid about thirty cents a day. Indeed for a year the "old Shah," Reza, didn't pay them at all. "Let them live off the land," he said. They did. When they went to collect for the landlord it was simple to collect for themselves as well. Some of the gendarmes made out quite well.

II

And yet, until 1941, there wasn't much active or violent discontent in Kalivana. The people were loyal to the old Shah — though he did little or nothing for them. The boys were conscripted into the Shah's fine new army. They were in admiring awe of the generals who strutted the streets of Tehran. One heard little about Russia across the frontier.

Then the beginning of the war. At first it affected Kalivana little, except that prices began to go up.

In 1941 came the rumors that the Allies, the Russians and the British, were about to invade Iran. The boys of Kalivana were hurriedly called up for service, marched away toward the Russian frontier. The village waited breathlessly for news.

It was lamentable news. The Russians fired a few shells, dropped a few light bombs — and the Shah's fine army collapsed. It wasn't so much the fault of the rank and file. Many of them stood their ground, bewildered and helpless. But, it is said, every vehicle that could turn a wheel was crammed with generals running away.

It had a profound effect on the men of Kalivana. They began to think about the "masters" as they never had before. Also some of the men picked up rifles that the troops had thrown away when they ran — hid them away for what might come. Kalivana people weren't all gentle villagers.

More news and rumors came — that the old Shah was deposed and

banished, that the Russians were occupying the land. In fact Russian troops were soon camped not far from Kalivana.

The people were worried and frightened, especially the women. There was much talk of rape and robbery. But the Russian troops kept aloof; when they were encountered they were quite correct in their actions. A sentry check post was set on the road from Kalivana to Tabriz, and all who went that way were closely questioned. Otherwise the village was little troubled by the Russians.

But, as the war went on, conditions grew steadily worse in Iran. The Allies who, of course, controlled the new Shah and his government, were running the country for their own benefit, not that of Iran. They disrupted the economy of the country by preclusive buying, to keep goods out of the hands of the Germans. They took over most of the transport facilities in the desperate effort to get supplies to Russia. There was terrific inflation, prices rising tenfold.

The landlords, including the owner of Kalivana, began to press even harder on their tenants. The gendarmes did their bidding. Hardly a sheep or a donkey in Kalivana was safe from them.

Then the Russians began to work on the discontent of the country. Not, at first, in a violent way. They concentrated their efforts on Azerbaijan. The border between that province and the rest of Iran was par-

tially closed, making contact between the two difficult. Meanwhile the frontier between Azerbaijan and Russia was wide open. Across that frontier was Russian Azerbaijan, speaking the same language with only a difference in dialect.

Every effort was made to make the two Azerbaijanians feel one. When the people of Kalivana went to Tabriz they saw Russian movies instead of the Hollywood films. Many printed pictures were distributed, contrasting the unhappy conditions in Iran with those in Russia.

Then came the Tudeh Party. This was a Communist, or near-Communist party, which had existed in Iran since the 1920's. Under the old Shah it had been illegal and had operated underground. Its membership was varied. Some were proletarians. A few of the leaders were of the upper crust of Iran. They were idealists who had come to despair of improving the wretched social conditions of Iran by working with the small and corrupt ruling clique.

Of one of the leaders, Jafar Pishavari, the world may hear more. He is the present prime minister of the autonomous state of Azerbaijan and the leader of The Tudeh, now known as the "Democratic" Party. He is of an aristocratic Iranian family. In the twenties he spent some years in Russia. On his return he began to agitate the beliefs he had learned. The old Shah promptly jailed him.

In jail he stayed until the Russians effected his release in 1941. Then he

and his party came above ground, began to organize and agitate.

Those who have met him say that he has a "pleasing personality," is soft-spoken and reserved, is one of the few of the Democrats who have education and background. They say he is one of the few real Marxian Communists left in public life.

III

The Tudeh wasn't very successful at the start. Its first meetings drew small audiences and mild applause. The Azerbaijani are not very good material. Nearly all of them are Moslems and the Moslem, like the Catholic, is antipathetic to communism. Also the peasant, according to those who know him, has, in spite of his down-trodden condition and ignorance, a certain tough independence and individualism that resists any effort to regiment him.

At first the Russians had no open connection with the Tudeh. Perhaps they thought it could win the country without active help. Or perhaps they were too busy fighting a desperate war to do much more.

But along in the summer of 1945 they seemed to realize that communism wasn't getting very far in Azerbaijan. Apparently they decided on a new approach.

Here's the way it worked in the village of Kalivana:

One evening when the men had come in from the fields and had their suppers a Russian truck drove up. The men in it were Tudeh but a different

lot from the ones who had been addressing political meetings. They parked in the open space in front of the crude little "coffee house" that is the social center of Kalivana. They honked the horn and soon had a crowd together.

What they said was quite different from the theoretical political harangues of the former political meetings. This was very direct and concentrated on one point. "Don't pay your landlord any more. When we are in power, the land will be yours."

The older villagers shook their heads. But many, especially those who were badly in debt, were all for it.

The next time the overseer came around there were many who didn't pay him a cent and swore they'd never pay again. When he protested violently some of the young fellows beat him up. Later they got their hidden rifles out and cleaned them.

And yet the great majority, even those who refused to pay, had no political motives in their heads. They thought themselves still loyal to their Shah.

In Tabriz the new methods were suited to the factory workers. "Stop working these long hours for a pittance. When we are in power, hours will be short and pay high. Make yourselves rich instead of the owner."

The Russians still kept ostensibly out of it. Few knew that Pishavari was in daily conference with the Soviet consul in Tabriz, Krasnick.

Pishavari also used to go to see the American consul. From the start he

has played for the support of the United States. He likens his activities to the American Revolution.

But the landowners were sure that the U. S. was on their side. They used to say around Tabriz: "Thank God for the atom bomb which will soon be used against Russia."

A word as to the new workers for the Tudeh, now become the Democratic Party. Many of them were Russian Azerbaijani who had been drifting across the border. They had been trained in the technique of agitation.

To justify its case before the world — and to incite the peasants — the Party put on a campaign of atrocity propaganda. In its newspapers it published circumstantial accounts of the wrongs inflicted by the gendarmes, the landowners' men, on the villages. There is no doubt that many of them were quite true. How in such and such a village the gendarmes had tied some of the villagers to trees while they robbed their houses. How in another village two men were shot and their bodies thrown into a cellar. Life is cheap in Iran.

IV

Events were moving toward the seizure of power, the establishment of the autonomous state of Azerbaijan. Even before it moved on Tabriz the Party began to hold an election, to elect a National Assembly which should declare independence and make a constitution.

In Kalivana the electoral procedure was this:

Trucks arrived in the village to carry the voters to the nearest polling place, in a large village some miles away. Many of the older peasants hesitated to vote, said to each other, "Let us wait and see how it all comes out." But when the truck came to the door the attitude of the Party men in it was such that the old fellows decided that they had better go along and vote.

At the polling place there were other Party men to help the illiterate voters, some 95 percent of the electorate, to fill out their ballots.

The election was an overwhelming victory for the Party candidates.

The atmosphere of revolution — not the American but the French Revolution — began to pervade Tabriz. More and more people began to leave their felt hats at home and wear the cloth caps of the workmen and peasants. The wearers of hats were hissed and sometimes stoned in the streets. There was an exodus of landowners and overseers from Azerbaijan.

In the papers appeared lists of men — officials and landowners — who were to be liquidated.

The liquidation began. As, for example, in the case of Ali Validi, police official of Tabriz. Walking in a back street he suddenly sensed that he was being followed. He whirled, drawing his gun — too late. The two men with tommy guns did their job.

Pishavari and the other leaders hastened to disavow such crimes.

But the police, investigating by the usual methods, found themselves hampered in various ways. And few police officials were eager to take an active part in investigations when they themselves might fall suspect.

Out in the country the rifles appeared. Armed bands of peasants were patrolling the roads. Here and there a landowner, trying to flee, was hauled out of his car and shot.

The retaliation against the gendarmes began. These were scattered around the country in posts of an officer and eight or ten men. In the night a large band of armed men would surround a post, attack in overwhelming force.

The gendarmerie couldn't cope with the situation. Then the Iranian troops, the few that the Russians had allowed to remain in the province, tried to restore law and order.

At that point the Russians came out in the open. A truck-load of Iranian troops would start toward a locality where a gendarme post had been liquidated. A Russian non-com, standing in the road, would stop the truck, curtly order it back.

Presently the Democrats were in full control in all the villages. Then armed forces began to converge on the capital. Buses arrived in the suburbs packed with men in work clothes carrying rifles.

Probably the Iranian governor in Tabriz was right in his decision to make no further resistance. He turned over the public buildings and was allowed to depart.

The autonomous government of Azerbaijan had come into full power.

The Russian pretence of non-participation were even more thin. Russian troops were guarding the public buildings and the offices of the Democratic Party. Russian cars carried the leaders around the city.

The new government made a great show of restoring law and order. A new army and a new gendarmerie were extemporized out of the ragged peasant riflemen. Pishavari sent a personal invitation to the U. S. consul to come and see two men hanged in the public square of Tabriz, one for robbery, one for rape.

V

Now for the Tudeh the period of promises had ended, that of fulfillment must begin. The latter was harder. Government had to have money to get along. For example to pay its new gendarmerie and army so that they wouldn't have to live off the country.

A vigorous tax collection campaign was begun. Tax collection, especially among the peasants, had always been rather lax. The old ruling clique had felt that priority should be given to the collection of rents.

Now tax collectors appeared in Kalivana with long lists of back taxes due. The peasants were appalled. True, they didn't have to pay the landlord any more, but they had to pay taxes on the land now as well as their other taxes. And these amounted

to more than the rent. The new collectors were almost as brusque in their methods as the gendarmes had been.

There were other difficulties. Many of the peasants, having spent their money instead of paying it to the landlord, found that there was none left with which to buy seed. The prospects for the new planting season looked thin.

There were difficulties in Tabriz too. The shopkeepers in the bazaars were told that if they didn't pay their taxes they could turn their shops over to be run by the government. They could continue to work in them as clerks.

The factory workers got their higher pay and shorter hours. But most of the superintendents had fled and there wasn't enough know-how left to run the factories except in the most bungling and inefficient way. Also the higher pay and shorter hours raised the selling price of goods so that the market disappeared. Most of the factories closed or ran with skeleton staffs. Government was faced with the problem of feeding the laborers who were out of work.

Today the future of Azerbaijan is uncertain. Public opinion is confused. I have talked with competent observers who have facilities to make some appraisal of that public opinion. They say that, if a free and secret ballot were held today, 90 per cent would vote against annexation by the Soviets. On the other hand an equal number would oppose a return to the old days — to the landlords, the

gendarmes and the ruling clique of Tehran.

The newspapers of Iran are now devoting three-fourths of their space to their new plans: for social reform, for reducing the poverty, ignorance and disease of the peasants, for bringing real democracy to Persia. If those intentions are sincere, the United States might do well to help in their

fulfillment if it has a chance to do so.

For world peace has a better chance if governments rest on the broad base of democracy instead of on ruling cliques — whether those be of the proletariat or of a landed aristocracy.

In the last war the slogan was: "Let us make the world safe for democracy."

Now it might be: let democracy make the world safe.



THE ENDLESS HOURS

BY GRACE MILBURN

MORE suns than we shall ever see
Have flamed against the oblivious sky,
And flowers, we shall never touch, must die,
And hearts, as weary as our own, will cry
For centuries to come,
As far from home
As you and I.

Yet the eternal tide
Leaves something more
Than salty wreckage on the rocky shore.
Though you have wept for me and I for you,
We have known peace and spring and rapture too.
And as the endless hours strike through time,
We stumble, fall and rise again to climb.