

Siren Songs

In Damascus

HAL LEHRMAN

UPGRADED last November from legation to embassy, the Soviet mission in Syria now occupies five times as much office space as before. Russian names on the accredited diplomatic list have mounted from four to thirteen, not counting lower-echelon staff. Ambassador Sergei Nemtchina, an old Oriental hand lately practicing in Thailand, is the first Soviet envoy to reside in Damascus permanently, his predecessors having divided their time with Lebanese Beirut. Economic-aid, cultural, religious, and miscellaneous good-will delegations arrive from Moscow with chain-belt regularity. Epic quantities of caviar are consumed by Syrians at gala Soviet receptions for each delegation, and for every holiday on the Red calendar.

Heigh-ho, Come to the Fair . . .

The first substantial Soviet invasion of Syria dates back to September, 1954, and the Damascus International Trade Fair. This was intended to be a one-shot event, Syria having little mass purchasing power to make an interesting market for foreign exhibitors. Soviet and satellite agencies nevertheless exhibited with such zeal that the fair was put on again in 1955, opens again this year on September 1, and promises to become a permanent institution.

The show has been an open sesame to political penetration. Last year Red China rented the largest floor space after Austria, with Hungary, East Germany, Poland, and Czechoslovakia also spread out.

Within two months of last September's sale of Soviet weapons to Egypt—a deal that sent Red stock rocketing in the Arab world—Syria signed trade accords with Poland, the Soviet Union, East Germany, and China, and one in January with Romania.

The artifice of these treaties is evident from Syria's trade statis-

tics for the first nine months of 1955. Trade with the Soviets had amounted to scarcely \$150,000, with Poland to \$200,000, with China (including Formosa) to \$280,000. (Throughout 1954 imports from East Germany were worth \$25,000, exports zero.) On the other hand, Syria's trade with the United States from January through September, 1955, exceeded \$20 million, with France \$27 million, with Britain \$28 million.

The western Big Three—without any trade pacts at all—have continued to be Syria's most massive suppliers and customers by far, even in purchase of the surplus Syrian cotton which the Communist countries were supposed to be rushing to buy. Significantly, none of the eastern pacts indicates the amounts of goods to be exchanged or credits extended.

Six Steps to Paradox

As soon as Damascus learned that new Soviet Foreign Minister Dmitri T. Shepilov was to visit Cairo this June, he was invited to stop in Syria on his way home. Although he failed to be denunciatory enough against Israel for Arab taste, Shepilov was otherwise an eminently successful guest, lavish in praise of Syrian greatness and in offers of Soviet assistance. It is a delicious Oriental paradox that this lovemaking goes on despite the fact that Syria's Parliament is entirely nationalist and predominantly anti-Communist.

Why, then, the seemingly hot Soviet-Syrian courtship? The key lies in certain phenomena peculiar to the exotic Levantine political climate: (1) The Right is conservative, but only in terms of instinctive bias and private wealth; it has no reasoned ideology, no serious program, and no discipline; it is torn by internal squabbles and personal vendettas. Therefore (2) the Cabinet, based on the Right, lacks the co-



hesion or firmness to give leadership in Parliament, which itself suffers from chronic instability. (In scarcely a decade of independence, Syria has had some twenty Cabinets, four Constitutions, and five military *coups d'état*.) On the other hand (3) the Left, though it holds barely ten per cent of the parliamentary seats, is organized, militant, and vociferous in demands for pro-Soviet gestures. The feeble government is dragooned into compliance because it lives in constant dread of (4) another revolt, which the Left might foment among two elements before whom the conservatives tremble: hyperpatriotic schoolboy street rioters and/or reform-minded army officers. Finally (5), Egyptian agents and (6) Saudi Arabian gold are great persuaders of Syrian politicians nowadays—the agents because Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser enjoys enormous prestige in the Arab world as arch-defier of Israel and the West, the gold for obvious reasons.

Fragile Coalitions

The Syrian Chamber of Deputies is hopelessly fragmented and disorganized, its authority barely stouter than during the period from March, 1949, to February, 1954, when a succession of military dictators ruled. One third of the 142 seats belong to "Independents," who are associated with no party, observe no political allegiances, and vote here and there as the wind blows. The rest adhere to groups that are parties by courtesy only, their reason for existence being rather to support one or another individual leader whose policies are strictly personal. Recent

Syrian Cabinets have been fragile, meaningless coalitions variously of conservative splinters, a vaguely pro-Soviet "Democratic Bloc" of unaffiliated Deputies, and scattered Independents.

CONGENITALLY NATIONALIST, the schoolboys of Syria—as well as teachers and freshly hatched young lawyers, of whom most Arab countries produce a large surplus—have lately come heavily under "socialist" influence. The youngsters can be induced to quit classes and parade at the drop of a slogan. At the beginning of June they stormed and took over the office of the Economy Minister, demanding his trial for permitting wheat shipments to the French in Algeria. A few days later, they rioted to have the United States Information Center in Damascus bolted up because a page of a music book on its shelves carried the score of "Hatikvah," the Israeli national anthem.

The government treats such hijinks with cautious benevolence. It has not been forgotten that just such a spate of adolescent demonstrations led indirectly to the downfall early in 1954 of no less a personage than General Adib Shishekly, the dictator on whom the U.S. State Department was putting its money as a genuine Syrian Strong Man. The police chief of Damascus is sometimes a military man, sometimes a civilian. But either way he is always under army influence. In 1954 the army took advantage of the student outbreaks to unseat Shishekly. Today the army is all the more inclined toward benign non-interference with the schoolboys because it is itself largely controlled by younger officers of pronounced leftist tinge.

Army with Three Left Feet

One western military attaché with long experience in Damascus replied as follows to my query on the strength of the Syrian military establishment: "I doubt if the Syrians themselves know. Let's say it's six brigades, including service units. But the size of an Arab army doesn't matter. What counts is the combative value. With the Syrians, it's near zero. They're all thumbs with their equipment. Their know-how

is close to nil. And they lack fighting spirit."

But at least one potential opponent has considerable respect for the Syrian Army—and that is the Syrian Parliament. After all, even after it came home whipped from Palestine in 1949, the army was able to rout the politicians and seize power.

Today, one faction in the military has pro-Soviet tendencies as a legacy from the Israel debacle: The West is blamed for inventing and maintaining the Jewish State; therefore Syria must look to the East. Another group favors Moscow because of a Nasser-like "neutralism." This coterie is primarily nationalist and has a strenuous admiration for Egypt's Revolution Command Council.

A third faction, the most important one, thinks well of the Kremlin for confused—but earnest—reasons of internal ideology. The Syrian officer corps is not a career for rich scions, as in most other Arab armies. Sons of the urban proletariat and the fellahin form the Syrian officer reservoir. Siding naturally with the underprivileged, they want social and economic reforms and feel perennial revulsion against the corruption and apathy of one do-nothing government after another. To them the siren songs of Moscow seem to beckon toward Utopia.

THE SOCIALISTS, known in Syria as the Arab Socialist Resurrectionist Party, or the Ba'ath, enjoy considerable influence in reformist army circles. Since this group holds only fifteen seats in Parliament, it is in the comfortable strategic position of being able to clamor that it is robustly for reforms without ever needing to legislate them or even to prove that it understands what such reforms imply. The concessions it extorts are exclusively on the foreign-policy front—and invariably on the side of Moscow.

Since the election of one lone Communist to Parliament in 1954, the Ba'ath, under its leader Akram Haurani, has increasingly turned fellow traveler, supporting Communist objectives in foreign policy, showering Moscow with compliments and the West with abuse. It is open knowledge in Damascus

that Haurani is backed by Army Intelligence special funds and even has a pipeline to the Communist strongbox.

The Communist Chief

It is also fairly clear that the real powerhouse on the Left is not Haurani but Khaled Bakdash, the first known Communist elected to an Arab parliament (another has since turned up in Jordan), and probably the native Communist chief for the entire Levant.

In his case the old saw about "money from Moscow" must certainly be true, because obviously no other source of funds exists for his large bills. For a by-election in October, Communists from all over Syria and Lebanon descended on the town of Homs in fleets of cars at party expense.

The election of Bakdash in 1954 was certainly not an accurate gauge of the party's real strength. He received nearly seventeen thousand votes, the third highest total in Damascus. But the Damascenes, including many conservatives, voted for him simply to vent their spleen against the West as brashly as they could. Afterward, they were alarmed at the possible consequences of their own temerity. Bakdash has been sedulously soothing their fears by seeming eminently reasonable on reform issues and reserving his thunder for anti-western causes, which are all safe and fashionable in present-day Syria. The Communist Party is generally credited with less than ten thousand card-carrying members, mostly among proletarian and white-collar concentrations in Damascus and Aleppo. The labor movement is infiltrated, not controlled.

WHAT the Communists lack in numbers they make up in talent, resources, and innocent helpers. Even sheiks and Moslem doctors of divinity are members of the Partisans of Peace, a notorious front for propagation of Soviet virtue abroad.

Of Syria's thirty-seven daily papers, none has a normal circulation much above four thousand, a losing proposition commercially, and bribery has long been an accepted means of getting one's own views into print—or of keeping conflicting views out

of print. Of twenty-three dailies in Damascus only two generally are pro-West. Being pro-West in Syria, incidentally, does not mean anything daring like endorsement of a regional defense system against Soviet aggression. It simply means expressing admiration for American technology while rejecting "imperialist" American technical aid, or being pro-Iraqi while at the same time denouncing the Baghdad Pact.

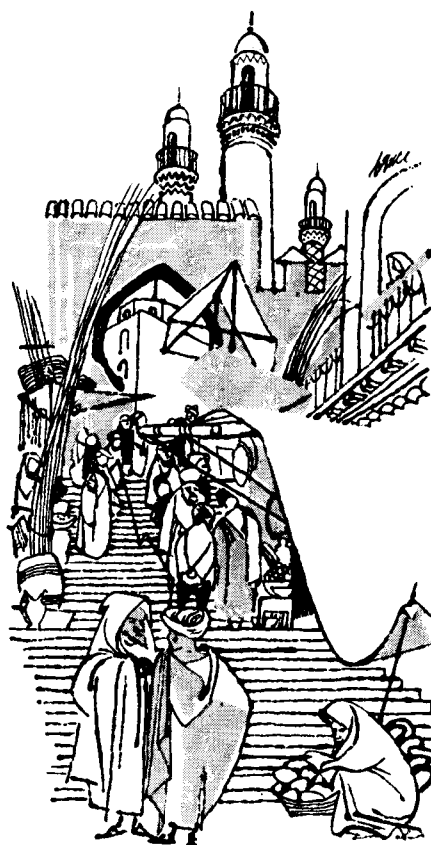
THE BAGHDAD PACT is a made-to-order whipping boy for the Communists. The army is hardly well disposed toward it either: Iraq is wealthier than Syria, its army bigger and presumably stronger; Syrian officers would lose much of their present political importance and relative rank in a merger. The Syrian Army, however, is not against pacts on principle. Syria had no compunction last fall against signing a pact with Egypt that put their armies under unified command, on paper, but actually created no mutual military obligations that did not already devolve on both as members of the Arab League. The one clear result achieved thus far is that the then Syrian Premier Saïd el-Ghazzi gave Premier Nasser the Grand Cordon of the Umayya and received the Collar of the Nile. The alliance has since been enlarged to embrace Saudi Arabia, which is similarly already an ally through the Arab League. This time Syria netted, apart from ribbons, a \$10-million Saudi loan.

Trial and Terror

Syria is the most xenophobic of all the Arab States. The assassination of Army Deputy Chief of Staff Lieutenant-Colonel Adnan Malki in April, 1955, was the pretext for a massive trial in which death sentences or jail terms were handed out to sixty-five defendants, mostly *in absentia*. The prosecution openly charged the United States with complicity, and offered as "proof" letters ostensibly written by an obscure student at Georgetown University allegedly recommending that the American Embassy's aid be solicited for a *coup d'état* that would realign Syria with the West by entry into the Baghdad Pact.

The whole question of Malki's

assassination has recently provided cause for a showdown between nationalist, Soviet-orientated elements in the army and more moderate groups. On August 3 President Shukry al-Kuwatly submitted his resignation because, despite heavy leftist pressure to hasten the executions, he refused to sign the death warrants of three men who had been implicated in the shooting. On the following day, however, al-Kuwatly withdrew his resignation on condition that no executions be carried out pending further study of the situation, and the showdown seemed at least to have been postponed.



Western observers who have kept long and sensitive vigil over the unstable Syrian scene find reasons to hope that in the last startling analysis, the sheer intensity of Syrian nationalism may prove a safeguard against extreme Soviet penetration.

A supercharged zeal for its "sovereignty" has prevented Syria from accepting any American economic aid missions or cash. Even negotiations for an urgently needed World Bank loan have been suspended, professedly because they threaten Syrian "independence."

Similarly, despite persistent re-

ports, there has been no sure confirmation of an arms deal for Soviet jet planes. Of course the Syrian high command would be delighted to acquire such weapons at giveaway prices. If it is true that the deal has nevertheless not been made, observers say, it may be because the planes would have to be accompanied by Soviet "technicians." The Syrian officer corps, which is interested above all else in retaining its power, would suspect and hate such dangerous guests even more than a western military mission. It is known, however, that Syrian purchasing missions have been shopping for western arms and that the Big Three are trying to decide what to sell them.

The Trade Squeeze

How much danger is there of another Army *coup d'état*? Judging from Syria's ripe tradition of coups and the timorous behavior of the Right, another military grab would seem possible any morning. It is pointed out, however, that such an adventure would be much riskier for its leaders than in previous years. A new coup could be headed only by officers known to be soft on the Soviet side. Iraq—and Turkey—would certainly not look tolerantly on such a sinister development just across their borders. Compared with Syria, both these countries are positively formidable.

As a matter of fact, Iraqi-Turkish displeasure over Syrian sullenness has already been expressed in a tightening economic squeeze. Tariffs on Syrian goods have soared, and both borders have been shut against Syrian smugglers by barbed-wire fences and, reportedly, even by mine fields. The plain economic truth, if only the rabid anti-imperialist and pan-Arab Syrian nationalists could bring themselves to acknowledge it, is that Iraq and Turkey were Syria's best customers, especially for cotton goods from Aleppo factories. Egypt produces the same things as Syria and is of little economic use.

The tensions with Iraq and Turkey have already made serious inroads into the Syrian economy, further shaken by wheat-crop failure and other difficulties. Some observers believe that these, if nothing else, may yet compel the Syrians to simmer down.

Kashmir: A Friendly Call

From a Northern Neighbor

M. YUSUF BUCH

ONCE A YEAR in Srinagar, capital of Kashmir, a fat Maharajah used to be rowed down the River Jhelum in a gilded barge. The bridges would be decked in variegated tapestries, children would parade in festive costumes, people would line up in thousands on the banks. The autocrat would then visit the Rajgarh Palace and, in ornate ceremony, receive the homage of his servants. The Kashmiris resented him but they enjoyed his gaudy show.

Last December, a similar pageant was staged in Srinagar, with the same Kashmiri settings and props. The center of the spectacle was a man just as rotund as the Maharajah. But he was no Oriental potentate and he was not content with mere glitter. In the same Rajgarh Palace, accompanied by a friend, he made a thoroughly political speech: He castigated Pakistan, denounced the "notorious" Baghdad Pact, recognized Kashmir as part of India, and warned the Kashmiris against "American monopolist circles" and their machinations. The man was Nikita S. Khrushchev. The friend was Nikolai A. Bulganin.

It was the first time a great power had intervened on the spot in the eight-year-old dispute over Kashmir between India and Pakistan. While the contestants had been wrangling over the land—with India controlling the bulk of it, thanks to its army and a government of its choice in Srinagar, and Pakistan demanding a plebiscite—diplomacy, whether western or Communist or Afro-Asian, had been content to look the other way. Most governments had endorsed the solution proposed by the *Security Council of the United Nations*: withdrawal of outside armies from Kashmir, followed by a plebiscite. Apart from that, all had avowed equal friendship for both sides and all had advised them to settle the dispute amicably. Except

when this sort of neutralist advice annoyed neutralist Prime Minister Nehru of India, the dispute had not developed any international asperities.

THE KHRUSHCHEV INCIDENT, therefore, was regarded in the West as a tempest of the teacup variety. When Pakistani Ambassador Mohammed Ali protested it during a debate at the United Nations Assembly, the clash with the Soviet representative was only momentary and most other delegates sat in embarrassed silence. The very Indo-Pakistani nature of the dispute was a kind of safe, nonconducting material; Kashmir could still be considered an insulated wire.

The Kashmiris themselves, however, received a shock. In describing them as "neighbors," Khrushchev reminded them of their perilous proximity to the Soviet Union. In addressing them directly, without the presence of any high-level representative of the Indian government itself, he gave them a sharp sensation of exposure. The move demonstrated that neither Kashmir nor the dispute regarding it was necessarily sealed off. What gave it significance was its drama as well as the fact that it was not discordant with either Kashmir's geography or its internal politics.

The Padok Corridor

So far as geography is concerned, the latest maps published in China indicate that the Padok Corridor is now regarded as Soviet territory. This corridor is a narrow strip of land in the high Pamirs that connects Sinkiang, an outlying province of China, with Afghanistan and divides the Tadzhik Soviet Republic from Kashmir. Owing to this transfer, Russia has a common frontier with Kashmir for the first time. It maintains a high-powered radio station and a training center for Asian

Communists in nearby Tashkent. There is also a military operational base in the same region with airfields, camps, depots, and training areas extending as far as the River Oxus, or Amu Darya, which forms the border with Afghanistan.

Historically, the area has held a certain attraction for Russia in its desire to expand toward the warm Indian Ocean. In Czarist times, several Russian generals elaborated plans, with varying degrees of seriousness, to invade South Asia through Kashmir and Chitral. These expansionist plans may be obsolete now, but it is questionable if Russia's collective leadership has wholly renounced them. The region is one of unmarked frontiers and, in the modern air age, no longer impassable. Kashmir's apples hang alluringly on the boughs for Russia.

'Nearer Every Day'

Kashmir's politics is hardly a deterrent to Soviet ambitions either. "We are not only near to the Soviet Union, we are getting nearer to her every day," said G. M. Sadiq, the Deputy Prime Minister of the Srinagar government. "In Kashmir," a writer in the *New Times* of Moscow wrote in 1948, "friendship for the Soviet Union and the people's interest in the life of the Soviet Union are particularly great."

There is a Red Square in Srinagar—no other exists outside the Communist world—which is the scene of government-sponsored rallies. The official flag is an adaptation of the hammer and sickle; it is a red flag with a sickle and plow which was designed by a Communist in the late 1930's and which takes precedence over the Indian tricolor. The slogan most often heard is "New Kashmir," the title of a manifesto drafted by a well-known Indian Communist, B. P. L. Bedi. Catchwords like "Down with the capitalists and imperialists" punctuate the utterances of the Ministers; the denouncing of "reactionaries," the talk of a "peace front," the swearing at "Anglo-American imperialists" and their "evil designs" to build bases in Kashmir are some samples of the jargon in vogue. Organizations like the Jammu and Kashmir Peace Conference, the Progressive Writers' Association, and