

April 14, 1942

**Letter of USSR Ambassador in Iran Cde. Smirnov
about Our Relations with the British in Iran**

Citation:

"Letter of USSR Ambassador in Iran Cde. Smirnov about Our Relations with the British in Iran", April 14, 1942, Wilson Center Digital Archive, RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 317, ll. 0005-0013. Translated by Gary Goldberg.
<https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/209070>

Summary:

Soviet Ambassador to Iran A. Smirnov describes British policy in Iran as well as its implications for the Soviet Union and for the Anglo-Soviet relationship. He suggests that the British are pursuing an imperialist policy in Iran and that this policy is responsible for the mutual distrust forming between the British and Soviet governments.

Credits:

This document was made possible with support from MacArthur Foundation

Original Language:

Russian

Contents:

Translation - English

Copy

LETTER

of USSR AMBASSADOR IN IRAN Cde. SMIRNOV ABOUT OUR RELATIONS WITH THE BRITISH IN IRAN.

[Handwritten across the top: ["[To] my archive. I. Stalin"]

I will dwell on some questions of our work here. I will begin with our relations with the British.

[Translator's note: the first three sentences of the next paragraph were highlighted in the left margin]. From the moment of my arrival in Iran I established close contact with [Sir Reader William] Bullard. Events have developed such that we have had to solve very many questions with him. It is true, here and there Bullard tried to pull a fast one, and go around me. He was punished for this several times by London. Private meetings with Bullard have given me the opportunity to study the character of the British, their strategy, intentions, and plans more closely. From the first meetings with Bullard I took the position of mutual interest in the military and political cooperation of our countries against Germany. When doing so I always proceeded from the position that the interest of the British in cooperation with us was more significant than ours in them.

[Translator's note: the next paragraph and the first two sentences of the following paragraph were highlighted in the left margin].

In personal relations both he and I observed mutual courtesy, trying not to allow an unpleasant competition, and giving one another the necessary services. However, a serious wariness existed from the very beginning. Right now this wariness is beginning to shift to mutual distrust. We are not the reason for this, but their old colonial policy and their greed.

Observing the local British representatives from the first days of the war I have had the opportunity to be convinced that the unfavorable situation on our front worried them very little. Some of them did not even try to conceal this. The British representatives used the period of the Germans' advance into the depth of the Soviet Union to prepare to enter the Caucasus. They expected that we would call them. Evidently not for nothing, the British soldiers who arrived in Kermanshah and Hamadan said that the end point of their quartering was Yerevan. General Wavell, who also arrived in Tehran in September with the intension of flying to Tiflis to develop a plan for joint operations of the Allied armies in the Caucasus, had certain plans to command a Caucasus Army. The British have energetically begun the construction of roads, seeking the right for themselves to build airfields in all points of Northern Iran, even up to our border. They repeatedly turned to us with a request to permit the construction of airfields in our zone and offered to assume all the expenses for equipping them. All this was substantiated by preparations for an upcoming transfer of aircraft to the USSR. Further events with our occupation of the Tehran airfield in March 1942 showed that the British had other plans. They were building for themselves, not for us. Not without reason did Bullard so stubbornly seek our expulsion from the Tehran airfield, declaring that our bombers could land anywhere.

[Translator's note: the next paragraph was highlighted in the left margin].

I informed you in my telegrams about the British plans to penetrate Iran and [their] ambitions to occupy the commanding heights of this country. I recall these plans and will cite a number of facts indicating that the British program of action in Iran is being

accomplished quite broadly and can represent a real threat to the interests of our country if we do not take countermeasures in a timely manner.

[Translator's note: the first sentence of the next paragraph was highlighted in the left margin]. The main attention of the British is being directed right now at seizing lines of communications. The transportation department of the British mission and the British state joint-stock transportation company, which has its own branch in Iran, are engaged in this work. The British have done the following in this direction:

a) Regarding airfields, airlines, and their servicing.

The British have completely occupied, equipped, expanded, and improved the airfields in Kermanshah, Hamadan, Abadan, and Ahvaz. Regular air communications have been established [between] Tehran, Baghdad, and Cairo, and Tehran and Abadan. In Tehran itself the British have tried to occupy all four airfields, equipping two of them with takeoff runways and fuel storage depots. We have managed to seize one of the airfields with great difficulty, however we have not yet been able to expel the British radio direction-finding service and prohibit the landing of their aircraft.

b) The construction and improvement of highways and railroads.

The Transportation Department of the British mission has concluded contracts with two firms, the Danish "[Komsaks]" and the Czechoslovak Skoda, for the improvement and expansion of the following highways:

1. Zahedan-Mashhad.
2. Bandar-Shahpur-Tehran.
3. Bandar Abbas-Kerman-Yazd-Tehran.
4. Khanaqin-Hamadan-Qazvin.

These firms have received considerable advances and are working at a rapid pace. The reconstruction of the highways of Iran being done by the British, but from Iranian money at the expense of the difference in the pound sterling exchange rate, is also explained by the need to prepare the roads to accept a large quantity of transit goods to the USSR. It ought to be borne in mind that all the above main highways have an important strategic nature. The British are completing the construction of two rail lines: Ahvaz-Khorramshahr and Quetta-Zahedan. The British actually control all the Trans-Iranian Railway from Bandar Shahpur to Tehran, having their controllers at each station, mainly military [people], without coordination with whom the Iranian railroad people have no right to act.

In Bandar Shahpur the British have occupied all the port and customs institutions and expelled all the Iranian personnel. The British flag has been raised over the port. The British have shipped out all the Iranian cargo in Bandar Shahpur to a neighboring station, but they are using up to 40,000 tons of the rails which were there to build the Khorramshahr-Ahvaz railway.

in Bandar Bushehr and Bandar Abbas the ports are actually occupied by British consuls without the permission of whom not a single ship has the right to make a stop or to conduct any operation to load or unload in this port. The influence of the Iranian administration in these ports is insignificant.

c) Penetration into Iranian industry and commerce

The British have also taken a number of measures in this direction. A British

commercial corporation has created a number of branches here to penetrate the commerce of Iran. The British have given a number of orders for leather, leather jackets, and coats to tanneries and orders for blankets to a mill in Qazvin, and an order for the production of silk to a textile mill in Chalus.

The British display great interest in the Iranian defense industry, trying either to buy such [industry] or to adapt it for their needs. British officers have conducted a survey of a number of Iranian enterprises: the weapons and machine gun factories and arsenal in Tehran, the Tehran power station, and coal and copper mines for the purpose of using them for the needs of the British Army.

d) Penetration of the Iranian Army

The British have carefully surveyed and studied the question of the available weaponry of the Iranian Army. All this data was collected by them by military officers specially detailed for this task. The project of purchasing the machine gun factory and Iranian weapons was developed by the British behind our backs and we found out about this at the last minute. We do not know exactly whether there are British advisers in the Iranian General Staff, but we know that the creation of military units in the south of Iran was done by the Iranians on the advice of the British. There are British instructors in the Iranian Air Force. There are up to 10 of them in the 5th Air Regiment in Tehran.

e) The quartering of British troops in the south of Iran

British forces in the south of Iran are chiefly quartered in Khuzestan in the cities of: Bandar Shahpur, Abadan, Khorramshahr, Ahvaz, Andimeshk Station, Dezful, Shuster, and in railway stations. In addition, there are British armed forces in Kermanshah and Hamadan. At the present time there are up to 10,000 troops in the south of Iran. About 85% of the British troops are quartered in the south of Iran, [and they] are Indians. The overwhelming majority of the officers are British.

The British command is pursuing a number of measures demonstrating that the number of troops in the south of Iran will be increased. New barracks, soldiers' camps with a brick foundation for each tent, airfields, and airstrips are being built. There are six such strips on the Ahvaz-Abadan line. Their own military police have been created. Military cargo is shipped under the guard of British soldiers.

f) British propaganda in Iran

The British have increased their propaganda in Iran in the last two months. It is true, for now it has a strictly correct [loyal'nyy] nature with respect to us, but it is not excluded that in individual cases it contains disguised attacks against us. They have created a special propaganda department in the Mission which in form is little different from the German Ministry of Propaganda. Skilled military specialists have arrived from London to organize this matter.

They have created special clubs where receptions of foreigners are held. There is a special department to promote the desired information into the press. A public relations bureau has been created somewhat like our VOKS [All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries]. Their own bulletin and weekly newspaper, "World Observer [Mirovoy obozrevatel]," is being published. Special importance is attached to radio and film propaganda. Work is done not only in the British zone, but also in Tehran. Judging from the plans, the propaganda department of the British Mission intends to organize work in all regions of Iran from our zone to the Persian Gulf.

[Translator's note: the first three sentences of the following paragraph were highlighted in the left margin]. It is characteristic to note that the majority of employees of this department know Russian, and the staff of the British Mission as a whole. They were in the USSR or participated in a particular operation against Russia and the Soviet Union between 1914 and 1919. The impression is created that the British are selecting their officials for Iran with an expectation of studying the Soviet Union. The assignment of personnel which Eden made recently was directed only at increasing this factor. The new British forces which have arrived in Iran have the same old stains of participation in particular actions in the north of Iran in 1919-1921.

[Translator's note: the next paragraph and the first sentence of the following paragraph were highlighted in the left margin].

The British are spending a lot of money to pursue their propaganda. It can be frankly said that the question of money is of secondary importance for them. The British literally spend money hand over fist. This is naturally understandable, for they aren't spending their own, but Iranian money.

[Translator's note: the first and last sentences of next paragraph and the first sentence of the following paragraph were highlighted in the left margin]. The occupation nature of the British pound sterling provides an opportunity for the "cultural" robbery of Iran. In changing 1,500,000 pounds sterling a month at a rate of 140 rials versus 67 rials in August, the British are helping themselves to exactly half in their pockets. This half is completely sufficient to maintain the British Army in Iran, for military construction, as well as for propaganda and bribing Iranian bureaucrats. In many cases the British are operating per the German-Japanese method. With one hand they give to the Iranians and make noise about this to the whole world, but with the other they take away. They sell them Soviet wheat and present this in the press as their concern about Iran. They import a small quantity of wheat from India, and then buy it up in Iran and ship it to Iraq and Syria. Moreover, the outlet for food goods to Iraq and Syria is immeasurably broader than from British holdings to Iran. Right now the British are occupied with solving the problem of including Iran in the sterling bloc. If they manage to do this then they will economically tie Iran hand and foot, and not only for the period of the War, but also for a lengthy postwar period.

The British intrigues are causing great unrest among the Iranians, who feel that the British want to turn them into their colony. Hatred toward the British is felt quite strongly. If the Iranians express an opinion against the Allies, to a considerable degree they mean only the British. The British are able to partially neutralize this hatred with discussions that everything they are doing in Iran is directed at helping the Soviet Union, and that they have no interests here. They mollify the broad progressive circles sympathetic to us with this, but they influence the Iranian bureaucracy and ruling circles with threatening methods, reminding them of the danger of the Sovietization of Iran.

[Translator's note: the first sentence of the following paragraph was highlighted in the left margin]. In striving to show themselves a disinterested power and guardian of the interests of Iran the British play frankly dirty tricks against us. When our units remained in Qazvin, a rumor was spread here that the Soviet Union was insisting on occupying Tehran and only the British opposed this. Having posed us the question of introducing troops into Tehran, immediately after they were introduced the British Mission engaged in the creation here of such a feeling that the representatives of the USSR were obstructing the withdrawal of troops from Tehran. It was the same situation with the Allied agreement. Initially they requested that we agree with some changes. Then, when we agreed they advanced the proposal not to accept the Iranian changes, but then again agreed with the Iranian requests. Even earlier it was the same situation with the young Shah. Initially they didn't want him, then insisted on his candidacy, but having made [him] Shah, they declared that he was not acceptable to them and Bullard did not go to the ceremony, but then declared that the young

Shah was completely suitable and they were cozying up to him right now.

[Translator's note: the first sentence of the following paragraph was highlighted in the left margin]. It can also be said that the British to some degree support the mistrust which the Iranians and the Turks have regarding the question of our policy in Azerbaijan. Bullard has repeatedly told me that the Iranians and the Turks complain to him of the broad propaganda pursued by our commissars in Azerbaijan. During the notorious trip of Kurds to Baku, Bullard moved between the Turkish Ambassador in Iran and [Prime Minister] Foroughi, like a pendulum, and tried to distract their attention from the British ambitions to play up to the Kurds and arm them. I am convinced that Bullard and [Hugessen] caused the Turks to write a/the note on the Kurdish question. A second note about disturbances in Rezaiyeh was also written under their influence. The Turkish trump card in the Azerbaijan question is strongest in the hands of the British. They can cajole and intimidate the Turks with the fate of Azerbaijan.

[Translator's note: the first sentence of the following paragraph was highlighted in the left margin]. In conclusion I cannot fail to note one more fact that from the moment of the introduction of troops into Iran and up to the present time the British are creating a state of alarm and uncertainty here. This situation will evidently continue until they are able to finally strengthen their positions and form a completely pro-British government. It ought to be recognized that in spite of a partial replacement of the cabinet, not a single cabinet has been formed here which would be a democratic cabinet capable of genuine cooperation with the Allies.

I have written you about our attitude toward the Iranian cabinet in information about the reasons for the recent government crisis.

In a separate letter I am informing you of our relations with the Turks and the Americans. As regards the representatives of the other countries they live here on British handouts. I will devote the next letter, which will go out in a week, to our work in Iran.

/signed/ A. SMIRNOV

14 April 1942
Tehran

Distributed [to]:

Cde. Stalin.
Cde. Molotov
Cde. Vyshinsky, [and]
Cde. Lozovsky

DEPUTY PEOPLE'S COMMISSAR OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS
[signature] (V. Dekanozov)