CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE RUSSIAN FRONT

I must now return to General Baratov, whom we left at Qazvin in August 1916 after his precipitate retreat from Khanaqin.\(^1\) By January 1917 he had felt strong enough to resume the offensive, and by the middle of March he had reoccupied Hamadan, Kangavar and Kirmanshah. This advance had coincided almost exactly with General Maude’s capture of Baghdad and the outbreak of the Russian Revolution. On 2 April contact was made with a small British detachment at Qizil Rubat, eighty miles north-east of Baghdad. But in May, owing to sickness, the total lack of local supplies, the depredations of the Kurds on his lines of communications, and the lowered morale of his troops, Baratov had been obliged to withdraw the bulk of his force to Hamadan, leaving detachments of varying importance at Kirmanshah, Kangavar, Daulatabad and Burujird. By June the Turks were again astride the high road between Qizil Rubat and Qasr-i Shirin. Now, in October, although seven months had passed since the Revolution, and although the republic had been proclaimed, Russia was still in the war, and General Maude was still hoping that Baratov would be able to co-operate in the operations he was planning against the Turks, who, on their part, were preparing to make a serious attempt to recapture Baghdad. But the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks on 7 November (N.S.) (the ‘October Revolution’) supervened and ruled out any such possibility.

At Burujird I should have preferred not to lodge at the house of the Consular Agent (whom I will call Mirza Ali), but in view of his official appointment I could hardly do otherwise.\(^2\) The morning after our arrival my first visitor was the Acting Governor, Nusrat as-Sultan\(^*\), a charming and cultivated old gentleman, not an official from Tehran but

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\(^1\) [See ch. XII.]
\(^2\) [The diaries, under the entry for 5 September 1917 reads “Mirza Ali Akbar, the British Agent, dressed in white and shading himself with an umbrella”; the 7th: “Held a Majlis in the garden and told everyone they must go to Ali Akbar first and discuss matters and he would get my orders”.]
the chief of the Gudarzi tribe, chosen for his local prestige and influence. He was followed by the heads of the departments of Revenue, Justice and Telegraphs, a prominent divine, the leading merchants, and finally representatives of the Jewish community, who surprised me, as they were about to leave, by standing in a line and reciting a long prayer in which the only word I could catch was my own name. All were unanimous that the development of the caravan traffic had come just in time to save Burujird from economic ruin. Indeed, when I came to go round the extensive bazaars the piles of goods stacked high in the caravansarais and shops, and the general bustle, were very striking.

Anti-Russian feeling was evidently strong. One of the grievances being that the Muscovites were forcing people to accept devalued rouble notes for their purchases, another that they were buying wheat to transport to Russia, another (voiced by the Telegraph Master) that they monopolized the telegraph lines at their pleasure, causing great inconvenience to the public generally and the merchants in particular. And I found the animadversions on the behaviour of our allies, openly expressed in public guest-rooms, most embarrassing, coming as they did on the top of the widespread assumption, indeed hope, that my journey portended the replacement of the Russian by a British presence. The assumption seemed to be confirmed when the Acting Governor circulated copies (including one to me) of a telegram he had received from Tehran announcing that arrangements had been made for the Russian garrison to withdraw from Burujird.

I had made a point of calling on the Russian Officer Commanding, by appointment between the visits of the officials and the merchants, on the first day. At the gate-house of his headquarters soldiers were lounging about, talking or reading papers. Although I was in field-service uniform for the occasion they made no attempt to rise, still less to salute. By good fortune the director of Revenue, who like many Persians in the north knew some Russian, happened to be with the Colonel when I was announced, and the interview passed off well. He recalled that when he was at Qasr-i Shirin before the retreat some British officers had motored out from Khanaqin and brought a welcome gift of food for his men.

He made no attempt to return my call, but this did not prevent him from sending round his Supply Officer on the day before I was due to leave, to ask for my help. This time communication was a little more complicated: he spoke in Russian to one of his soldiers, who translated