

THE TOLSTOY-DOLAN MISSION AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF US-TIBETAN RELATIONS: AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE EVENTS THAT UNFOLDED AFTER THE FIRST VISIT OF AMERICAN REPRESENTATIVES TO LHASA IN 1943

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This article investigates the events that unfolded during and after the visit of two Office of Strategic Service (OSS) agents to Lhasa in spring 1943. To date, not much is known about this first visit of American representatives to the state of Tibet, which happened at a time when the US and its allies' strategic priority was the containment of Japanese influence in the China-Burma-India (CBI) Theater. Through an analysis of cables between the US government agencies in Washington and with embassies of allies in both Washington and Chongqing, this article reconstructs these events. More specifically, the complications that unfolded throughout the year 1943 can be traced back to the visit of Captain Ilia Tolstoy and Lieutenant Brooke Dolan to Lhasa in February.

The major findings of this analysis are: 1) Lhasa was actively endeavoring independence from China and sought to do so by establishing friendly relations with the US, prior to the end of WWII; 2) the involvement of the OSS in the Tibetan independence struggle, at the time against the advice of the State Department, foreshadows the CIA's actions in Tibet in the 1950s; 3) the suboptimal communication between US government agencies, as well as the secretiveness among the Allied forces, most prominently the Chongqing Government.

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Introduction

Early in 1943, two American envoys, who were also OSS agents – Captain Ilia Tolstoy (the émigré grandson of the famous Russian novelist) and Lieutenant Brooke Dolan – made their journey to Tibet to present a letter by President Roosevelt to His Holiness the Dalai Lama.¹

During their visit, the two agents learned that the Tibetans had great use for a set of long-range broadcasting devices. The Tibetans asked whether the Americans could supply one of these devices, as they had none. The request was proceeded to the OSS headquarters in Washington in due

practice, but when “preparations were made for the dispatch of the equipment, flustered State Department officials learned of the request. They objected the gift because it would be ‘politically embarrassing and cause irritation and offense to the Chinese,’ who had territorial claims on Tibet.”² The American mission to Tibet was not only a diplomatic endeavor, but also a strategic operation. The OSS, backed by India, sought to establish an alternative supply corridor to Burma in order to support the Allied war effort in China against Japan. Conversely, the State Department was concerned about the Chinese reaction to American assistance to Tibet, on which the KMT government in Chongqing had territorial claims. In

¹ Document 525. The Tibetan Regent (Tak-dak Pundit) to President Roosevelt, in Noble, G. Bernard and Perkins, E. Ralph. *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1943, China*. Department of State, Office of the Historian.

² Richard Smith, *OSS: The Secret History of America's first Central Intelligence Agency*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2005. 255.

addition, the British, another ally, had their own view on, and interests in the situation of Tibet, which they did not hold back with when the British Embassy in Washington sent a letter to the Department of State informing the recipient on their interpretation of Tibetan sovereignty.³ On May 18, 1943, the Chinese concentrated a force of 10,000 troops along the Tibetan border, reportedly to gain foothold of the region and to eventually bring Tibet under effective Chinese control.⁴

This article investigates the events that unfolded after the visit of the two OSS agents in Lhasa in more detail. For this purpose, the author undertakes a thorough analysis of diplomatic cables that were sent or received by the State Department. Through this effort, the article provides a detailed reconstruction of the diplomatic, strategic, and military considerations by the parties involved, most notably the Tibetans, the Chinese, the British, and various US government agencies. The findings in this article are expected to inform the discourse of the Tibetan independence struggle, which is still going on today, as well as the role that American intelligence agencies played therein as early as 1943.

The CBI in the early 1940s and the OSS' mission in China

The broader context of this article is the Allied anti-Japanese war effort. Before the focus returns to the year 1943 and the Southeast-Chinese region, a brief exposition of the state of war in the CBI will be provided: World War II, from a Chinese Perspective, was essentially the 2nd Sino-Japanese War (中国抗日战争), which broke out on July 7, 1937. Prior to 1937, Imperial Japan had already

³ Document 532, The British Embassy to the Department of State, in Noble and Perkins, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1943, China*.

⁴ Document 538, The Chargé in China (Atcheson) to the Secretary of State, in Noble and Perkins, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1943, China*.

occupied parts of the Chinese mainland through its aggressive, expansionist policy in Asia.⁵

Burma is of central priority for this paper's analysis because the Japanese occupation of Burma from 1942 to 1945 interrupted Allied supply of ROC territory with headquarters in Chongqing from India, under British/Commonwealth Control, to China by land route. Since Japan effectively controlled both China's West, i.e. coastal regions and Burma, the Chinese Nationalist government—as well as Allied troops and officials under the lend-lease program of the Sino-American Cooperative Organization (SACO)—were isolated. Therefore, the only supply route from India was by air; the so-called *Hump*,⁶ an airlift by an American military transport aircraft from Assam, India to Kunming in Yunnan, over the Eastern Himalayas.⁷

General Stillwell,⁸ Rana Mitter,⁹ and Barbara Tuchman give accurate accounts of the dire situation of the Sino-American anti-Japanese war efforts in Burma.¹⁰ The general strategic quagmire that the Allies faced was accentuated by underlying discord in their own ranks. The British leadership, for instance, oftentimes showed little commitment to assist the Chinese fight against Japan unless it served their strategic interests. The Chongqing Government, as far as the British were concerned, was better left to “fall than to disrupt the major effort against Japan.”¹¹ In general, London hoped for a victorious but weak post-

⁵ Spence, Jonathan D. *The search for modern China*. WW Norton & Company, 1991. 443 ff.

⁶ The Burma Road had been supplying some 20,000 tons a month of supplies, to which the only alternative was to fly much smaller amounts across the Hump from India into China. See also Rana Mitter, *Forgotten Ally: China's World War II, 1937-1945*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013. 511.

⁷ See for example Maochun Yu, *OSS in China: Prelude to Cold War*, Naval Institute Press, 2013.

⁸ Joseph Warren Stilwell, *The Stilwell Papers*, Da Capo Press, 1991.

⁹ Mitter, *Forgotten Ally: China's World War II, 1937-1945*.

¹⁰ Barbara Wertheim Tuchman, *Stilwell and the American Experience in China, 1911-1945*, Macmillan, 1971.

¹¹ Mitter, *Forgotten Ally: China's World War II, 1937-1945*. 299.

WWII China, in order to continue to maintain a British sphere of influence in Southeast Asia. After the war, the British hoped to regain control of Burma. General Joseph Stilwell was a strong supporter of a campaign to retake Burma and secure the land supply route from India to continue the anti-Japanese struggle, which in his opinion should rely mostly on ground troops.¹²

The role of the OSS in the war at that time was still young; only the year before had Roosevelt created the OCI (Office of the Coordinator of Information) and made William Joseph Donovan its director. The organization was created prior to the United States' official entry into the war to direct "un-American" subversive practices such as "espionage, sabotage, 'black' propaganda, [and] guerrilla warfare."¹³ On June 13, 1942, a few months after Pearl Harbor, the OSS was created with a more general mission of intelligence collection and analysis, assisting other military and government agencies and special operations, thus gradually assuming the role of the US' first centralized intelligence agency. The leadership, however, remained largely the same and so did the close tie to Roosevelt. The connection between Roosevelt and the OSS as his personal foreign policy arm is further exemplified by the fact that President Truman terminated the OSS briefly after the end of WWII.

The OSS mission in the CBI included not only operations to assist the Kuomintang Forces and their intelligence apparatus around Dai Li,¹⁴ but also to lead them into Burma, Tibet, and the so called 'Red China', i.e. the Chinese Communist base in Yan'an where OSS agents also helped train and equip Mao's and Zhu's famous 8th Route Army.¹⁵ Among the agents sent to Yan'an was Lieutenant Dolan, who was part of the earlier Tibet mission (The Tibet Mission will be

introduced in more detail in this article. For more detailed information on OSS missions in Europe and Asia, Smith gives an accurate account and Yu provides a detailed history of OSS activities in China).

The Japanese Imperial Army that the Allied CBI forces under Stilwell's command were up against was one that had proven itself capable to conquer and hold control over vast territories in Asia, not just in China's east but also in Southeast Asia. After the Japanese success in Pearl Harbor, Japanese strategists were inspired to quickly capture Hong Kong and the Philippines. It suddenly seemed that the mighty British Army was not such a formidable foe, which made Burma look more like an attractive target. The main strategic value of the Japanese Burma campaign was to put a wedge between China and India, inhibiting supplies to the Chinese eastern-front, "and making the eastern flank of British India vulnerable. On February 9, the Japanese 15th Army moved to take the capital, Rangoon, and then drove north toward Toungoo and Mandalay."¹⁶

If not already evident earlier, the Sino-British rift became evident in the aftermath of the Japanese advance towards Burma. Chiang Kai-shek was ready to suspend the Fifth and Sixth Armies to help the British defend Rangoon, "but his gesture was rejected by Archibald Wavell, British commander in chief for India and supreme commander, Far East."¹⁷ This rejection, felt in both Chongqing and Washington, was rooted in British imperial pride and their unwillingness to have their colony defended by the "dirty Chinese."¹⁸ The British hubris was further punished by military disaster on February 15, when they lost their naval base in Singapore to Japan. It was during this time that Stilwell arrived in Chongqing to assume his position under the supreme commander of the Allied Forces, while General Chiang Kai-shek was set as the chief of staff of the Allied Forces in the CBI. Initially,

¹² Tuchman, *Stilwell and the American Experience in China*, Chapter 8.

¹³ Smith, *OSS: the secret history of America's First Central Intelligence Agency*. 1.

¹⁴ See for example Frederic E. Wakeman, *Spymaster: Dai Li and the Chinese Secret Service*. Univ of California Press, 2003.

¹⁵ Smith, *OSS: the secret history of America's First Central Intelligence Agency*. 255 ff.

¹⁶ Mitter, *Forgotten Ally: China's World War II, 1937-1945*. 533.

¹⁷ Ibid. 533.

¹⁸ Ibid. 533.

Chiang was accommodating of Stilwell, which is mostly of what he represented; a gesture of closeness between the US and China, but clearly “he had no intention of actually ceding command to a Westerner.”¹⁹

Stilwell’s campaign to reclaim Burma at the end of March with two of Chiang’s best armies went without success. If we can believe Stilwell’s diary, the sole reason for the campaign’s failure was incapacity of and miscommunication with Chongqing and the Generalissimo’s premature decision to retreat.²⁰ In the weeks to follow, Stilwell attempted to reinstate control in Burma, a mission that went terribly wrong; Stilwell and his remaining troops were trapped in the Burmese Jungle in late April. Of these forces, Stilwell managed to save a group of eighty people, “including American, Chinese, and British soldiers, Indian engineers, and Burmese nurses. Stilwell led this unlikely group on a terrifying journey through a jungle where disease and snakebite were as much a threat as the enemy.”²¹ On May 20th, the group reached India, and from there Stilwell went back to China. From then on relations between Stilwell and Chiang remained sour because both blamed the failed Burma campaign on each other.²² The Japanese army pushed back all Chinese troops and secured Burma, but did not advance further into China or India because their objective, i.e. denying supply of the Chinese through India, had succeeded.

¹⁹ Ibid. 535

²⁰ See also Stilwell and White, *The Stilwell Papers*.

²¹ Mitter, *Forgotten Ally: China’s World War II, 1937-1945*. 545.

²² In addition to the fact that Stilwell, in Chiang’s opinion, had jeopardized the Burma mission through his miscalculations which cost the deaths of 25,000 Chinese and 4,500 British and Indian troops, the loss of Burma led to another instant that would further exacerbate Stilwell-Chiang relations: Some 45,000 tons of Lend-Lease supplies intended for China were now instead assigned to the Nationalist armies that had made it to India. Throughout the war, Stilwell would retain control over the Lend-lease he favored, and exacerbating tensions that would corrode the alliance with the Nationalists. (Mitter, *Forgotten Ally: China’s World War II, 1937-1945*. 533).

Tibet in 1943 and the Tolstoy-Donovan Mission to Lhasa

The so-called rooftop kingdom of Asia had enjoyed factual autonomy and independence from China since the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911. While the Kuomintang government officially continued to claim suzerainty over Tibet, they were not able to project actual control over the vast mountainous territory in China’s far west. The events of 1942, in particular the loss of Burma to the British, did not create the tensions between Tibet and China. It rather elevated these onto the stage of WWII-Asia and into the consciousness of the Allied Powers, more specifically, that of the British and the Americans; the KMT Government had already earlier demanded from Lhasa to allow the transit of military equipment and other goods through Tibetan territory. The Tibetans, however, did not want to create “any excuse for a Chinese presence in Tibetan territory [and refused]. They feared that should arrangements go awry, the Chinese army and their ‘new’ equipment and men might acquire a permanent home on Tibetan roads.”²³

The need for the Americans to move cargo through Tibet was apparent due to the loss of Burma in 1942. Therefore, the OSS made the plan to send two agents to Lhasa to talk to the Tibetans directly; their alleged mission: “to survey a possible supply route from India to China via Tibet to replace the Burma Road that had two months earlier fallen to the Japanese.”²⁴ Initially, Lhasa refused the admission of the two Americans, presumably because rejecting foreigners from countries that had not established relations to their territory was due practice for Tibetan officials at that time, or alternatively, because this request was presented to the Tibetans through middlemen of the Chinese government. Only through the help of British officials in India could Frank Ludlow, head of the British Mission to Lhasa, be persuaded to talk to the Tibetan Foreign Minister Surkhand Szasa regarding this matter. Ludlow presented the

²³ Lezlee Brown Halper, and Stefan Halper, *Tibet: An Unfinished Story*, Oxford University Press, 2014. 29.

²⁴ Ibid. 30.

reasonable argument that the visit of the two Americans should be advantageous to Tibet's political future.²⁵

While the two Americans were officially sent to Tibet to present regards from President Roosevelt and examine the prospects to find an alternative supply line for China, it later became clear that their actual orders had come from General Stilwell and Donovan with a mission to observe the "attitudes of [sic] people of Tibet; to secure allies and discover enemies; locate strategic targets and survey the territory as a possible field for future activities."²⁶ What made this journey of Tolstoy and Dolan into Tibet so remarkable is that it represented the first official visit of representatives of the US government to Tibet. It appears that especially Tolstoy made a great impression on the Dalai Lama, to whom he was granted an audience, where Tolstoy presented the gifts Roosevelt had given them on their way: a gold watch and a silver framed picture of President Roosevelt together with a letter written by the President in person. The Tolstoy-Dolan mission was a success in many ways. The Tibetans not only welcomed the two Americans with all honors and even an audience with the Dalai Lama, but also responded with gifts and a note that read: "this is the first time that friendly relations were established between Tibet and the USA,"²⁷ which illustrates that the Tibetans were aware of the historic precedent of the event as well as its meaning for Tibet's future struggle as an independent country.

During his visit, Tolstoy not only offered a radio transmitter, but suggested that a Tibetan delegation "attend a World Peace Conference to be held in 1944; he had, in a moment of excess, overstepped the bounds of his position."²⁸ Both offers raised the question of Tibet's diplomatic status, a question worth to be addressed by an official American perspective at another time. While Tolstoy and Dolan accomplished their mission of establishing friendly relations with the Tibetan

government, the visit did a disservice to American interests in the CBI, because in the year 1943, stable relations with China were more important than friendly relations and diplomatic commitments to a Buddhist kingdom on the top of the Himalaya.

The supply road from India through Tibet to China, the reason for the mission in the first place, was not built in the end, because "it would take too long and have little impact on the war effort."²⁹

Analysis of State Department Communications regarding the Tibet issue

This chapter undertakes the analysis of cables between the State Department and several offices in Washington and Asia (OSS headquarters, American Delegations in New Delhi and Chongqing, British Delegations in Washington, New Delhi and Chongqing). The purpose of this analysis is to determine what diplomatic consequences unfolded after the two OSS agents had promised the Tibetans a radio transmitter set. On a side-note, one may point out that the first written exchanges between Lhasa and Washington all emphasize the mutual goodwill, sympathy, and gratitude regarding the historic precedent which constituted from this first encounter between representatives of the American and Tibetan people. On the 19th Day of the 1st Tibetan Month in the Water Sheep Year, which is calculated by the State Department as February 24, 1943, the Dalai Lama wrote to President Roosevelt, expressing great gratification for his letter and the tokens of goodwill (an autographed photo and an exquisite gold watch) through his envoys, Capt. I. Tolstoy and Lieut. Brooke Dolan. The Dalai Lama further expressed his appreciation for the interest that the people of the United States of America showed towards his country and pointed out the significance of the war that the people of the US, along with 27 other countries, were fighting against "nations bent on conquest who are intent upon destroying freedom of thought, of religion, and of action everywhere." He goes on to emphasize that, "Tibet also values her freedom and

²⁵ Ibid. 31.

²⁶ Declassified OSS 'Project FE 2' File cited in Halper and Halper. *Tibet: An Unfinished Story*. 32.

²⁷ Ibid. 32.

²⁸ Ibid. 33.

²⁹ Ibid. 33.

independence enjoyed from time immemorial.”³⁰ The underlying message that the Dalai Lama sends to Washington is: embedded into his appreciation of the good fight for freedom by the US; that Tibet is and always was an independent country; and needs her political and religious freedoms protected which implies that these freedoms were being threatened, although the origin of the threat is not clearly stated.

The first time the radio set gets mentioned is in the memorandum of a telephone conversation on March 20th by Alger Hiss (Assistant to the Adviser on Political Relations) and Colonel M. Preston Goodfellow of OSS, who reported that the Cabinet of Tibet had requested “a complete radio transmitting set for use for broadcasting within Tibet.” Furthermore, Colonel Goodfellow points out that the OSS “has such a set which could be made available for this purpose.” The Colonel finally reports that Donovan and the OSS in general believe that the two men in Tibet (Tolstoy and Dolan) “had done a good job of establishing friendly relations with the Tibetan authorities and that it would be helpful to our war effort in ‘the general area’ if the set should be sent.”³¹

Ten days later, on March 30, George Atcheson Jr. (Assistant Chief of the Division of Far Eastern Affairs) voices the first concerns over the possible implications that this radio transmitter might have. His assessment reads as follows: “After careful consideration of this matter in so far as it may affect our relations with China, we are of the opinion that to supply a radio transmitting set to the Tibetans would be politically embarrassing and cause irritation and offense to the Chinese.”³² The reasons Atcheson gives for this assessment are: (1) the Chinese had requested such a radio transmitter set under lend-lease two years earlier, which was

declined, (2) the Chinese would thus be offended, (3) the Chinese claim suzerainty over Tibet, which would not welcome the installation of a radio transmitter in Tibet, (4) that the Chinese would not object American visitors to Tibet in general, but not favor the supply of equipment that may be used against them.³³

Atcheson thus recommends that, “from the view of our relations with China, that these considerations be brought to the attention of the Office of Strategic Services; that that agency be urged to drop the proposal to ship a radio transmitter to the Tibetans and that some other gift be substituted therefore.”³⁴

When there was growing opposition against sending the radio set in the following weeks, Atcheson did not change his position on the matter in order to not upset the Chinese. On April 3rd, Mr. Hiss had another telephone conversation with Goodfellow inquiring whether it would be necessary for the State Department to reiterate its strong opposition against the provision of the radio set to Tibet in a more formal matter, as “unless OSS should decide to drop the matter of sending transmitting station to Tibet, [he] believed that the Department would wish to press its objections more strenuously.”³⁵ However, Goodfellow made one remark that further complicated the situation. He pointed out that the radio set may not be seen as courtesy of the American Government, but rather be regarded as strategic asset for American use. Mr. Hiss, in due respect to his capacities as adviser on political relations, did not comment on this strategic matter and Goodfellow asserted that it indeed did not warrant “any reconsideration on [the State Department’s] part.”³⁶

Instead of a more formal expression of opposition by the State Department, Donovan personally wrote to Hornbeck (Department of State Adviser

³⁰ Document 527. The Dalai Lama of Tibet to President Roosevelt, in Noble and Perkins, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1943, China*.

³¹ Document 528. Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, by Mr. Alger Hiss, Assistant to the Adviser on Political Relations (Hornbeck).

³² Document 529. Memorandum by the Assistance Chief of the Division of Far Eastern Affairs (Atcheson), in Noble and Perkins, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1943, China*.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Document 530. Memorandum of Conversation, by Mr. Alger Hiss, Assistant to the Adviser on Political Relations (Hornbeck), in Noble and Perkins, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1943, China*.

³⁶ Ibid.

on Political Relations) on April 12th, explaining the importance of continuing with the ‘matter’ regarding the newly established US-Tibet relations from a diplomatic perspective and adding the strategic element to be considered: If the Tibetan request for radio transmitters be complied with, it “will open the Tibet region 1200 miles east and west for Allied influence and further modernization of territory which will be strategically valuable in the future.”³⁷ He also mentions that the US authorities in New Delhi and the Government of India were in agreement with this interpretation, i.e. the diplomatic and strategic value of providing the radio set.

One week later, on April 19, the State Department received a seemingly unrelated letter by the British Embassy. The document does not mention the Tolstoy-Dolan mission or radio transmitters in any regard, yet it shows that for some reason the diplomats at the British Embassy in Washington must have felt the urge to enlighten the State Department on the status of Tibet. The reason why the British mention Tibet in the first place appears to be a conversation between Mr. Eden (British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs) and T.V. Soong (Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs) on March 15, in which the “question of Tibet” was raised. For the remainder of the document, the British side explains at length what in their understanding the status of Tibet is, which is conform with the Chinese interpretation, i.e. in short that Tibet is a part of the Chinese Republic.³⁸ While the British document itself represents a well-researched analysis, or at least one possible interpretation of the status of Tibet in international legal terms (suzerainty under Qing Dynasty, the 1913 Tripartite conference in Simla which was not ratified by the Chinese, the 1934 Huang Mu Sung mission to Lhasa etc.), it lacks any reference to the

events that had unfolded over the prior two months. Based on the document, the British side simply thought it might be of value to inform the American side on the conversation between the British and Chinese Secretaries and Ministers, respectively, of Foreign Affairs on the contents of their conversation, which happened to have revolved around the status of Tibet.

On May 14, Mr. Merrell, the Chargé in India to the Secretary of State, sent a telegram to Washington which drew the attention away from the infamous radio transmitters and back to the question of the availability of Tibet as alternative supply route for lend lease equipment from India to China. The Tibetans finally agreed to the transportation of supplies to China after the Government of India had subsequently “pressed Tibet to act favorably on this long-standing question on grounds that continued refusal would lead to serious deterioration in relations between Tibet and China.”³⁹ However, the Tibetan side only tolerated non-military shipments without foreign supervision through their territory.

The next day a telegram reached the State Department that first confirmed that the Tibetans agreed to a supply route through their territory as a strategic measure to give no possible justification to Chongqing for “any aggression against Tibet by saying that all possibility of transport from India across Tibet was denied China.”⁴⁰ It appears that there was sufficient reason to believe that the Chinese had already taken considerable preparations to invade Tibet: there reportedly were leaked orders by the Generalissimo to his governors in Sikang, Yunnan and Qinghai to send troops to the Tibetan border and the Tibetans were urged by the British Government, who had known of this, to agree to the supply route.

³⁷ Document 531. The Director of the Office of Strategic Services (Donovan) to the Adviser on Political Relations (Hornbeck), in Noble and Perkins, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1943, China*.

³⁸ Document 532. The British Embassy to the Department of State, in Noble and Perkins, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1943, China*.

³⁹ Document 534. The Chargé in India (Merrell) to the Secretary of State, in Noble and Perkins, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1943, China*.

⁴⁰ Document 536. The Chargé in India (Merrell) to the Secretary of State, in Noble and Perkins, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1943, China*.

This intelligence differs from the telegram one day earlier, which states that it was the Indian Government that had taken influence on the Tibetan decision. Yet, since the British controlled India, the terms British and Indian Government were interchangeable. The telegram from May 15th contains information on the whereabouts of Tolstoy and Dolan for the first time since the Dalai Lama had written at the end of February that the two representatives of the American people had left Lhasa headed for China. Merrell had just received a letter from Tolstoy sent from within Tibetan territory, dated April 17, reporting that Chinese and Tibetan troops were “advancing toward each other and that Chinese troops had received their orders from Central Government.”⁴¹ An American officer (Lt. S. H. Hitch, Assistant Naval Attaché in China) confirmed the presence of Chinese troops at the Tibetan border on May 18. The force of Chinese troops along the Tibetan border in Qinghai was estimated at 10,000. Interestingly this information surfaced through a cable by Secretary of State Hull to Atcheson, who got the intel of the American officer via the British Embassy in Washington, which had learned about the Chinese troops from the British Embassy in Chongqing.⁴² It certainly is interesting that the State Department received intelligence collected by an American officer in China through the information network of British Embassies. Clearly, Mr. Hitch informed the Department of War. However, inter-agency communication in Washington in 1943 seems to have been, deliberately or not, sub-optimal. Throughout the following cables between State Department and American Legation in Chongqing, reports accumulate that confirm the movement of Chinese troops towards the Tibetan border in Qinghai; assess the Chinese strategy to be aimed at securing transports through Tibet in short-term; and to bring Tibet under effective Chinese control

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Document 537. The Secretary of State to the Chargé in China (Atcheson), in Noble and Perkins, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1943, China*.

in the long term.⁴³ While evidence of Chinese troops at the border was piling up, Mr. T.V. Soong had reportedly told Churchill at a Pacific Council meeting in Washington on May 20, “that there was not and would not be a concentration of Chinese troops against Tibet [...]”⁴⁴

Over the next three months there seemed to be no new developments in the issue as far as the State Department was concerned, until, on August 17, Atcheson received a report sent to Chongqing back in July, from the Embassy Officer at Lanzhou (John S. Service). It was around July 10, that the two OSS officers Tolstoy and Dolan had arrived in Lanzhou. Mr. Service described “the attitude of Captain Tolstoy and Lieutenant Dolan as being strongly pro-Tibetan and critical of China and of what appear to be Chinese intentions in regard to Tibet.”⁴⁵ It furthermore becomes clear in this cable by Atcheson, that this pro-Tibetan sentiment by the two OSS agents had become broadly known not only among American officials in China, but also to the Chinese Government. Dr. Victor Hoo, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs had voiced his concerns in this regard to Atcheson stating confidentially “that he had received reports to the effect that Captain Tolstoy has assured the Tibetans that the United States would support them in their desire to remain independent of China.”⁴⁶ Dr. Hoo further expresses his surprise about these reports as “the United States had always shown a ‘very correct attitude’ in regard to Tibet.”⁴⁷

On August 28, the British confirm the presence of Chinese troops at the Tibet-Chinese border, based on Indian intelligence reports. They furthermore

⁴³ Document 538. The Chargé in China (Atcheson) to the Secretary of State, in Noble and Perkins, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1943, China*.

⁴⁴ Document 539. Memorandum of Conversation, by Mr. Joseph W. Ballantine of the Division of Far Eastern Affairs, in Noble and Perkins, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1943, China*.

⁴⁵ Document 542. The Chargé in China (Atcheson) to the Secretary of State, in Noble and Perkins, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1943, China*.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

report an actual arms race along the border, as the “Tibetan Government are said to have found it necessary to increase their own forces and there is considerable nervous tension.”⁴⁸ Over the following cables that reached the State Department, there is mounting evidence that the number of Chinese troops along the border increased. Chinese officials, however, most notably the Foreign Ministers Soong and Hoo, consequently reaffirm British and American officials that there (1) are no Chinese troops at the Tibetan border, (2) that even if there were troops at the border, China would never invade Tibet and (3) that Tibet is considered Chinese territory in the first place, and that other nations should not take interest in the matter and the actions of the Chinese Government in that area.⁴⁹

On October 4, the whole diplomatic, and possibly military, Tibetan-Chinese-American dilemma seems to get resolved. Gauss reports to the Secretary of State (Berle), that Chinese officials have informed the American Embassy and that there is no recent additional troop concentration on the Tibet-Qinghai border, “but that he understands that ‘some’ airfields are being constructed there by the Chinese.”⁵⁰ The Chinese report seems to be correct, since three weeks later another cable from Chongqing reaches the State Department that the Indian Government complained to the Chinese Government about the increased number of Chinese planes flying over Tibetan territory. The American assessment of this Indian complaint is “a further small indication of British interest in Tibet as opposed to China’s claim to suzerainty over that special area.”⁵¹

⁴⁸ Document 543. The British Embassy to the Department of State, in Noble and Perkins, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1943, China*.

⁴⁹ See for example Document 549. The Acting Secretary of State to the Ambassador of China (Gauss), in Noble and Perkins, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1943, China*.

⁵⁰ Document 550. The Ambassador in China (Gauss) to the Secretary of State, in Noble and Perkins, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1943, China*.

⁵¹ Document 551. The Ambassador in China (Gauss) to the Secretary of State, in Noble and Perkins, *Foreign*

The whole issue of the almost open conflict between Tibet and China resolved as quickly as it appeared. Since the year 1943 marked the height of WWII in both Europe and Asia, it comes as no surprise that this otherwise remarkable incident received no further notice and prominence. On the one hand, nothing happened in the end, while it was naturally in the interest of all allied parties to quickly forget about this diplomatically embarrassing quagmire. All this has contributed to the fact that the Tolstoy-Dolan mission and especially the events thereafter is relatively unknown in the historic discourse about the WWII CBI theater, US-Tibetan relations, as well Sino-US relations.

This article was able to reconstruct the events, which largely are unaccounted for in the existing literature, through cables sent and received by American government agencies. Future research on additional sources, most notably British and Kuomintang diplomatic cables and intelligence reports, could help to confirm the findings of this study and to further investigate the topic.

Conclusion

This analysis has investigated the diplomatic cables that reached the State Department in the year 1943 regarding the situation of Tibet and, in particular, the events that unfolded after the visit of the two OSS agents to Lhasa in February. The source’s general importance lies in that it documents the first time that diplomatic relations between Tibet and the United States of America have been established. While the official purpose of the mission was to explore the possibility of a supply route from India to China after the Japanese had occupied Burma in 1942, the actual secret mission of the two agents was to determine Tibet’s value for the US greater strategy in the Asian theater.

Furthermore, this analysis investigated whether the source informed the discourse on Tibetan independence struggles vis-à-vis Chinese claims of Tibetan territory and US involvement therein at a

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very early stage. Shortly after the two OSS agents had visited Tibet, assured the Dalai Lama of American support of Tibetan independence, and relayed the Tibetan request for a radio transmitter set to OSS headquarters, which was approved by OSS headquarters but discouraged by the State Department, the Chongqing Government started to assemble as many as 10,000 troops along the Qinghai-Tibetan border. This hard fact of Chinese troops along the border was confirmed by several independent intelligence reports from Indian, British, and American sources. The Chinese side, most prominently Foreign Minister T.V. Soong, repeatedly denied the existence of any Chinese troops in the area.

The reason for the concentration of troops apparently gets resolved toward the end of the year, when the Chinese inform the American Embassy in Chongqing that they were building airfields in the area. While the airfields seem to have actually been built, it remains unresolved why the Chinese side was so unrelenting in not telling the truth about their actions along the border. The American Embassy and the State Department left it at that. Regardless of whether the Chinese concentrated troops only to build airfields, or whether there was further strategic consideration with regard to Tibet involved, the Chinese actions in that area led to a considerable degree of insecurity in Tibet and prompted the enforcement of Tibetan defenses along their border to China.

Another finding of this analysis is the suboptimal communication between US government agencies, especially between the Department of War and the State Department. Often did American diplomats learn about developments in the CBI only through their British colleagues, including developments that involved their own men in uniform, for example, the two OSS agents or the case of Navy Lieutenant Hitch. While the British embassies in Chongqing, Lhasa, New Delhi, and Washington all were assisting their American allies through intelligence cooperation, it also has to be pointed out that London clearly pursued its own strategic goals in WWII Asia, an instant that also greatly affected the events in Burma the prior year. With regards to Tibet, the British repeatedly took the

official Chinese position regarding the status of Tibet under international law, while at the same time maintaining their diplomatic relations with Tibet. The reason for the British approach in doing so may be found in their motivations to not upset China, similar to the State Department's position, and assume suzerainty of the Tibetan territory once the war was over.

This article ties together the events that unfolded in 1943 after the visit of the two OSS agents - Tolstoy and Dolan. In particular, the diplomatic dilemma the State Department was confronted with vis-à-vis their Chinese allies, and the rising tensions between Tibet and Kuomintang troops along the Sino-Tibetan border later that year. The findings in above analysis inform the discourse on later US-Tibetan relations, the Tibetan struggle for independence, and US intelligence agencies' involvement therein, especially with regard to CIA operations in Tibet in the 1950s under the Eisenhower administration.⁵² Since the CIA is the direct successor of the OSS, it can be concluded that the Tibetan Government around the Dalai Lama, and the US Intelligence Community had a history.

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