
Taline Ter Minassian, Reginald Teague-Jones. Au service secret de l'Empire britannique

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/7815>

DOI: 10.4000/monderusse.7815

ISSN: 1777-5388

Publisher

Éditions de l'EHESS

Printed version

Date of publication: 15 December 2012

ISSN: 1252-6576

Electronic reference

David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, « Taline Ter Minassian, Reginald Teague-Jones. Au service secret de l'Empire britannique », *Cahiers du monde russe* [Online], 53/4 | 2012, Online since 09 September 2013, connection on 10 December 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/7815> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/monderusse.7815>

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Taline TER MINASSIAN, **Reginald Teague-Jones. Au service secret de l'Empire britannique**. Paris: Bernard Grasset, 2012, 467 p.

- 1 As if to distract from its own sanguinary excesses, many of the twentieth century's more repressive regimes took great care to establish a martyrology to inspire the masses. Thus the Third Reich commemorated the assassinated SA-activist Horst Wessel with its second anthem, Mao's China celebrated "Sister" Jiang Zhuyun with an opera, and every Soviet schoolchild was well acquainted with the story of Pavlik Morozov, the teenager who was murdered by relatives after he had denounced his father to the GPU. Many of these tragic tales bear little resemblance to historical fact, as Catriona Kelly demonstrated in *Comrade Pavlik: The Rise and Fall of a Soviet Boy Hero* (London: Granta Books, 2005). In a meticulously researched new book, Taline Ter Minassian likewise convincingly deconstructs the mythology surrounding the "26 Commissars," a group of Bolshevik and other revolutionaries who were executed in Central Asia after the fall of the Baku Commune in 1918. According to the official version, Socialist Revolutionaries arrested the group in the eastern Caspian port of Krasnovodsk after it had fled the Azeri capital, and three days later all were brutally shot on orders of a wicked British spy, Reginald Teague-Jones. Their story inspired a poem by Sergei Esenin, an Isaak Brodskii painting, a 1933 feature film and an immense monument in Soviet Baku, which was demolished after independence.
- 2 Dubbed an "agent of British imperialism," by Joseph Stalin,¹ the story of the Englishman supposedly behind the killings is the subject of Ter Minassian's highly

readable biography, *Reginald Teague-Jones: Au service secret de l'Empire britannique* (In the British Empire's secret service). Ter Minassian, a professor at the Institute for Oriental Languages and Civilisations (INALCO) in Paris, tells a fascinating tale. Teague-Jones was the orphaned son of a language teacher who was raised in St Petersburg before the Revolution, where he mastered Russian, French and German. Upon his return to England, he eventually entered the Indian civil service where his linguistic abilities secured him a posting as a political officer on the colony's troubled North-West Frontier. The First World War took him across the border to Persia, to check German ambitions there, and in 1918 Teague-Jones travelled to Turkestan in the guise of an Armenian merchant as Britain's "Political Representative in Transcaspia." It was in this capacity that his name became linked to the fate of the 26 commissars.

- 3 In what is the most valuable chapter of the book, Ter Minassian carefully disentangles the complicated story of how the Baku *communards* met their fate somewhere along the Transcaspian Railway. She is by no means the first to have done so, but her account is judicious and appears sound (Spoiler alert – the English spy didn't do it). If Teague-Jones most likely had no hand in the matter, Bolshevik accusations of his culpability effectively ended his career in Central Asia. For fear of any reprisals, he even changed his name to Ronald Sinclair and left government service to act as an "agent voyageur" for various British commercial interests in the region.
- 4 The outbreak of the Second World War saw a re-entry into the Crown's service, now as a consul in New York involved in "Indian, Jewish and Communist affairs" in the United States. Serving under the Canadian industrialist William Stephenson with the British Security Coordination, his main goal was to counter American sympathies for decolonisation in India. The post-war years, which saw Sinclair's enter into a comfortable retirement, merit only a few final pages. All along her discussion of the Englishman's career, the author also provides extensive background detail about the various events in which he took part, from being a teenaged witness to Bloody Sunday in St Petersburg to intelligence cooperation during the Second World War.
- 5 While pitched at a broader public interested in espionage and adventure, Ter Minassian's book is buttressed by extensive research in the British Library, the (British) National Archives, as well as Teague-Jones' personal papers at the India Office. The author confesses that it is hard to remain objective when writing a biography. Inevitably one's relationship with her subject becomes "presque amoureux" (p. 12). Nevertheless, she avoids becoming infatuated and instead gives us a lively account that will take a well-deserved place among such classics as *Eastern Approaches*, *Ace of Spies*, and Bruce Lockhart's *Memoirs of a British Agent*. I do hope it will be translated into English as well.

NOTES

1. J.V. Stalin, *The Shooting of the Twenty-Six Baku Comrades by Agents of British Imperialism*, <<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1919/04/23.htm>>