

# "If The Worst Happens . . ."

SOME years ago, an Australian professor, reviewing the Commonwealth's protectionist trend, defined an "import" as "something that will be able to get into the country only by parachute on a moonless night." Substitute "Aid to Russia" for "Import" and you have expressed the fullest Nazi hopes for their 1942 campaign.

Whether these hopes will be realised it would be rash to say, but they will not be realised easily. The cutting of the Caucasus and Caspian supply lines would have to be followed by a bashing in of the Murmansk-Archangel aid-pipe in order to realise them in Europe. But even then could—or could not—aid flow in along other Asiatic routes?

Soviet Asia has the longest continuous sea coast under any single government in the world. Its also enormous land boundaries run for about half their distance alongside Allied-held territory — free China, British-occupied Persia, and Afghanistan. But both land and sea boundaries are almost completely iced in all winter, and made difficult by frigid conditions even in summer: the Arctic Ocean because it is arctic, and the Karakoram, Tien-Shan, and Altai ranges (which flank the South) because they are all over 20,000 feet high. Yet there are ways through.

## Golden Road to Samarkand

The first is the Golden Road to Samarkand itself — the most romantic highway in the world. Long ago, down some indefinite vanishing vista of centuries, while Britain was a forest and Russia a swamp, Central Asia was cultivated and cultured. Then cavalades and caravans trod hard this slender link along the Oxus between East and West, Egypt and China. But slowly and inexorably, as the wet North dried, sands crept across the once fertile plain, cut off the Oxus from its Caspian, smothered the

The first of two articles written for "The Listener" by A.M.R., answering the question

"Can an isolated Russia carry on?"

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## ROADS INTO RUSSIA

civilisation of Samarkand, Tashkent, and Bokhara, and made the Golden Road a camel trail. . . . Now a new kind of caravan has begun. The traveller, having seen always fewer and fewer traces of westernism as he pushes further into the remote north-east corner of Iran, comes suddenly upon the incongruous and utterly unexpected sight of great modern lorries, hammered and sickled, trundling the Golden Road towards Merv from depots under the minarets of Meshed.

Meshed, the most bitterly Asiatic city of anti-European Iran, has already been to some extent a Russian Aid-Entry Port. Now that the German advance has it the mountain-tunnelling trans-Iran rail track that has hitherto been Russia's main southern entry, Meshed becomes the only immediately available one. "Lease-lend" material will have to cor . up the railway to Teheran, and then go by lorry to Meshed to reach the Russian Central Asian railway link-up at Merv. Then either the Turksib (Turkistan-Siberia) Line will take it to Central Siberia, or the Kazakistan Line into the Urals.

## A Surveyor's Nightmare

But this route is insecure; Iran must be supposed to be as restive under occupation by its two traditional enemies (whose jealousy used to keep it independent) as is Denmark, say, under

the Germans. Anyhow New York-Bushire-Teheran-Samarkand-Kubyshev is so fantastically indirect a route that some more direct one from India itself will certainly be sought. Why not through Afghanistan, seeing that, though in theory the Amir rules the whole country, the railway up the Khyber Pass right to Kabul itself is kept permanently in British Army hands and runs through underground Maginot-like fortifications? Kabul to Herat is a comparatively short hop—on the map. On the spot, however, it is a surveyor's nightmare through untamed mountains and tribesmen. Wash that route out.

## A "Barely Possible" Route

The south-west slice of Afghanistan, where the ranges rise direct out of the dry Iranian plateau, is quite another proposition. For from Khandahar, just across the Bolan Pass from British-owned Quetta, there is almost level, if almost desert, country right up to Stalingrad. Moreover the normal difficulty of any mountain-skirting route is here solved by nature—in summer at least. The parallel lines of rivers striking right athwart the course are never big enough streams to get themselves through to any ocean or lake, and in the dry season are just not there at all. Water for boiling radiators will indeed be summer's chief difficulty on this route. But in winter there will be great snow-drifts. And in between the seasons—well, Alexander the Great brought his Greeks through to India this way. It's a barely possible military supply route; but only when needs must and daredevils drive.

"But," say you, studying the map, "if any southern route into Russia must now go through Samarkand, why all this dog's-hind-leg round-aboutness to reach there? It's only a straight short jump from India direct." So it is indeed. Only the jump happens to be over the 25,000 foot Roof of the World.

*The road to Shengri-la: A bridge across the Indus on the route to the little principality of Hunza*



Under the Pamirs' steep north eaves lie the sub-tropical cotton fields of the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic. Under its southern eaves lies the Vale of Kashmir, the Garden of India. Garm, on the Soviet side, is a considerable town, with airport and all, living under arctic conditions in mid-June well up the roof-slope itself. And Tajik villages, approached on horseback along single-plank bridges and balconies round cliffs, climb higher still—right up to Fedtchenko, a weather station inhabited all the year round at the exact altitude of Mt. Cook. There is, indeed, a road right through the Pamirs, a road of sorts, having one pass 12,500 feet high, another 13,775 feet, and a third somewhere over 15,000 feet. (This third is a round figure because no European has ever crossed it.) The "road" goes up the Gilgit, a canyon-walled tributary of the Indus; enters the nearest place to Shangri-la outside of imagination—Hunza, a little principality so isolated that its language has no discoverable connection with any other in the world; and finally gets to Kashgar in Chinese Turkestan. Obviously no enemy will overrun India this way, nor will any "aid" reach Russia.

## By Water

The U.S.S.R.'s frozen coastline actually offers bigger, better (though not brighter) opportunities than its frozen land boundaries. Ice and enemies apart, it is a matter of mileage. Mercator's projection has distorted our minds as egregiously as it distorts areas far north and south. Accordingly we find it hard to grasp the obvious — that Siberia's arctic ports are nearer the United States than those of Iran and India. But whoever heard of ports on the Arctic? Only the Russians, who have been obsessed with the determination to create them ever since the skiff of Detchev the Cosack was carried, through the strait that (unfairly) bears Behring's name, into the warm Pacific. The results so far are that, while it took Baron Nils Erik Adolf von Nordenskyold the two whole summers of 1893 and 1894 to make the North-east Passage one way, just before this war two ships went from Archangel

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