‘People Who Squeeze and People Who May Be Squeezed’: Across Mongolia, 1908

Although Garnett was expected to sacrifice his leave and to contribute towards the costs of his expedition, Sir John Jordan and colleagues in the Foreign Office had been keen to sanction it. Previously, official investigations in the remoter parts of China and Mongolia were deemed necessary in the aftermath of the Boxer Rebellion. On his 1902 journey in eastern Mongolia, Charles Campbell had traversed west to Urga and then onwards to Kiakhta, on the Mongolian–Siberian border. He travelled for 5 months and a report on it, running to 43 pages, was published as a parliamentary paper in early 1904. Soon afterwards, a further blue book relating to Mongolia appeared. That report was written by George Kidston, first secretary at the British Legation in Peking, with whom Garnett later served and then briefly replaced as head of chancery in St Petersburg. Kidston’s report recounted a less ambitious undertaking than Campbell’s, a three-month journey on a route which ran parallel to Campbell’s but which, unlike it, did not altogether by-pass the Gobi Desert. However, Kidston’s party was prevented by severe weather from proceeding to Urga and returned to Peking via the Trans-Siberian Railway.

An investigation in Mongolia in 1908 was deemed necessary for several reasons. Since Campbell and Kidston had reported, China had apparently been trying to consolidate its power in Mongolia. This related, among other things, to the enforcement of anti-opium edicts. In addition, as a response to these measures, the Russian government had stated that it might be obliged to strengthen its garrisons on Mongolia’s northern border. At the Foreign Office, these machinations were seen as rather predictable. China had quite naturally wished to capitalize on Russia’s preoccupation in the aftermath of the Russo-Japanese War to strengthen those sections of its northern borders across which
an invading Russian army would cross. In the spring and early summer of 1906, the precise scope of Russian ambitions had been unclear, but it was rumoured that she hoped to occupy two eastern provinces of Mongolia. In June, the Russian Foreign Minister, Alexander Isvolsky, confirmed that Russia might feel it necessary to strengthen its frontier posts and garrisons.

In retrospect, at least, Russian intentions loomed large in Garnett’s mind. In August 1907, the year preceding his journey, Britain had signed a convention with Russia that was intended to resolve long-standing differences in Central Asia. By virtue of that agreement, Persia was split into spheres of interest whereby Russia predominated in the north and Britain in the south east. A central neutral zone lay in between. In neighbouring Afghanistan, which was also the focus of long-standing rivalries, British predominance was acknowledged. Tibet was also included in the convention. A British expedition had been undertaken to Lhasa in 1904 mainly on account of persistent suspicions of Russian exploration and intrigue there. Some of those changes had been conducted through the aegis of Lamaism, which was the predominant religious faith in Mongolia also. Concerns that Russia would continue to exploit this religious connection persisted in the discussions which preceded the 1907 convention. The convention dictated that Britain and Russia would conduct any future dealings with Lhasa through the Chinese emissary there, the Amban. In addition, the convention decreed a three-year moratorium on scientific exploration in Tibet.

The consolidation of Chinese authority in Tibet was symptomatic of developments elsewhere in Chinese Central Asia as well as in Mongolia. Garnett’s brief was, in part, to report on the nature and extent of the military presence of the Peking authorities, especially in the main government centres in northern Mongolia. This was prompted, among other things, by information about tours undertaken in the spring of 1906 in Mongolia by Prince Su and the Duke P’u of the Chinese Court. To Sir John Jordan, those tours were chiefly intended to ‘put the Mongol Princes on their guard against outside encroachment’, but some newspaper reports in Peking suggested that the Chinese government had more ambitious plans to consolidate their hold on Mongolia by means of administrative reform. Chinese control of Mongolia was exercised through mostly high-ranking officials appointed by and responsible to the Li Fan Yuan (Court for the Regulation of the Feudatories) at Peking. The issue that required investigation was if Chinese efforts to consolidate its authority in Mongolia were likely to antagonize Russia. Formal diplomatic contact between Russia and Mongolia had existed