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Book Review: Most Secret Agent of Empire: Reginald Teague-Jones Master Spy of the Great Game by Taline Ter Minassian

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Book Review: Most Secret Agent of Empire: Reginald Teague-Jones
Master Spy of the Great Game by Taline Ter Minassian

Cover Page Footnote

Dedicated to the memory of Kate Harshberger.

Ter Minassian, Taline. *Most Secret Agent of Empire: Reginald Teague-Jones Master Spy of the Great Game*. Translated by Tom Rees. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. xviii + 283 pages. Hardcover, \$29.95.

Ter Minassian's biography of Reginald Teague-Jones (known as Ronald Sinclair after 1922) grabs the reader's attention immediately. In the introduction we learn of the historian's efforts to do the research despite closed British Archives, a spy's penchant for destroying his own papers, and a world-wide tour to track him down! We also learn that, at the end of his life, Teague-Jones returns to Britain and settles into a retirement home with his second wife. Upon her death, Teague-Jones tracks down his first wife - fifty years after their divorce - and brings her to live with him at the home. It is intriguing that his first wife's grandfather was an Armenian Nationalist leader during the time that Teague-Jones was reporting from Transcaucasia!

The book's agenda is to link Teague-Jones to the "Great Game" between Russia and Britain over the territory between British India and the Russian empire. Ter Minassian contends that this game continues into the twenty-first century and that Teague-Jones played a key role in its evolution. She is not alone in making this argument and cites many historians and writers supporting the link. Ter Minassian certainly makes the case that Teague-Jones was intimately involved in many parts of this game. He started his early career on the Indian Frontier, spent much time in Persia/Iran, was in Transcaucasia for the Russian revolution and civil war, knew of the dismantlement of the Raj from New York, and worked to promote counter-propaganda when the United States was pushing for Indian Independence. Although this elite British intelligence officer surely provided key information, and in some cases definitely smoothed out situations, his lasting effect on British strategy seems minimal. In fact, the British did not follow his advice concerning the central Asian region. Had Britain used more force against the fledgling Soviet government at that time, the game may have turned out much differently.

The biography is set up in chronological order running from Jones's boyhood (before he compounded his middle and last names) in Liverpool, to his formative years as a companion to a family in St. Petersburg, Russia during the 1905 revolution. It follows his career from the Indian frontier district at the beginning of World War I, through Persia, Central Asia and the Caucasus region, then to Iran and the Middle East, and on to New York and Bermuda at the outset of World War II. The thorough account of his travels, friendships, and writings ends around 1950 when he retires. The author seeks to understand the change in Teague-Jones's social class, rising from an obscure lower-middle class family, to rubbing shoulders with the elite of British social and military society as well as with Indian and central Asian tribesman.

The book is both broad and deep. Extensive use of extant writings, letters and reports gives a voice to Teague-Jones which can be sentimental, cynical, humorous and prophetic. We have a picture of a strong personality: ambitious yet directed towards serving his nation; a charming raconteur who could function in many social circles; and an imperialist often wistful at the changes he saw, yet intimately involved in bringing some of those changes to pass. He was the first to drive an automobile across the entirety of Iran. He had the colorful adventure in a Model A Ford named Zobeida!

The book has depth in that it transcribes incredible amounts of detail. Sometimes overwhelming, the book includes the background leading to Teague-Jones's involvement, the

biographies of his friends and acquaintances, and marvelous descriptions of the landscape he travels through. The latter take an ethnographic twist when we learn of the tribes, songs, dances, foods, and customs of many of the people Teague-Jones encountered.

Ter Minassian stresses one particular event in Teague-Jones's life: the case of the execution of twenty-six Bolshevik commissars in Turkmenistan in 1918. She presents a full historiographic account of the incident along a railway line where twenty-six men supporting the Reds in the Civil war were killed. Although the Soviets blamed Teague-Jones for the event in histories, speeches and films, Ter Minassian and other scholars believe he had little to do with the decision and may not have known of the execution at the time. Only after the fall of the Soviet Union has the importance of the incident, the symbolism of the various monuments, and the villainization of Teague-Jones quieted down. The author also spends a great deal of time describing a First World War German spy, Wilhelm Wassmuss, whom Teague-Jones was assigned to destroy. Rather than succeeding, Ter Minassian asserts that the young British agent learned from the elusive Wassmuss, developing and evolving his own Secret Agent methods and tactics.

This book provides a plethora of material especially for those interested in the British intelligence world, the Indian Political Service, Early Soviet Russia, the politics and convoluted nationality issues in the Caucasus region and Central Asia, and the intelligence relations of Britain and the United States during World War II. The text is extremely dense, not only due to the extraneous material, but also because of the writing style itself. (This may be partially due to the fact that the book was originally written in French, and there are lengthy sentences with multiple inserts). Nevertheless, *Most Secret Agent of Empire: Reginald Teague-Jones Master Spy of the Great Game* is a fascinating book. The reader gets to meet and ponder a man who observed and valued people unlike himself, and undoubtedly brought a better understanding of the West to other regions of the world.

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