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IN THE STEPPES OF CURZON

THE NEW GREAT GAME: BLOOD AND OIL IN
CENTRAL ASIA

★

By Lutz Kleveman

(Atlantic Books 287pp £16.99)

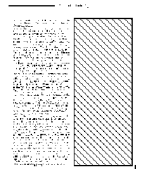
'ENJOYABLE' AND 'GRIPPING' were not the words I expected to use about this book. 'Important', yes, and I anticipated recommending grimly that we owed it to ourselves to read Lutz Kleveman's book if we wished to speak with any authority on the future of relations between the great powers in the next few decades. But a book on oil reserves, multinationals and the World Bank was bound to be full of figures. This one contains some, of course, but it is primarily a travel book, and to my surprise I came to resent the moments when I had to put it down. Even more surprisingly, I wished that its author would turn out to be British, at least by upbringing, so that I could take pride in him, as I did recently in another star of reportage produced by the troubles in the Middle East, Jason Burke of *The Observer*. Not only does Kleveman brim with ingenuity, he also seems to have been so charming that virtually no fox of a diplomat or politician, east or west, could resist giving him an interview. On one occasion, somewhere above Kazakhstan, a tycoon who finds Kleveman sitting beside him in his private plane and sipping his champagne has to ask him: 'Who are you and who let you on board my jet?' But, alas, he turns out to be a German brought up in America and merely educated in Britain, at the London School of Economics.

The author takes a useful geographic approach to his subject. He begins in the far west of the 'arc of crisis' that stretches from Georgia and Azerbaijan in the Caucasus, across the new Central Asian republics formed from the former Soviet Union, to Afghanistan and Pakistan. As he travels from one blighted republic to another, one's heart nearly stops each time he describes the devastation and dysfunctionality left behind by a ruthless Communist regime in Moscow that was interested only in fulfilling production targets. Thus poor Georgia is still partly occupied by the Russian army, which is pressing the government not to cooperate with Western oil companies by allowing the export of Azerbaijan's oil to Turkey through its territory; Baku is a 'shit hole' left barren by decades of pollution and eager only to get rich in order to attack Armenia and level the score for the war of the early 1990s; Turkmenistan, whose dictator has given his own name to Monday, is 'Stalin's Disneyland'; Pakistan is the 'cradle of terror'; etc. Everywhere, too, familiar problems – population explosions, heightened expectations, rudimentary literacy and widespread corruption – raise their ugly heads and make sane government impossible.

In the first Great Game, Curzon and his predecessors merely tried to keep Russia out of Central Asia in order to safeguard India. Serious consideration was never given to exploiting any mineral resources that the region might

have, so remote was it from the ocean. The author quotes Curzon's famous definition of his position to great effect. 'Turkestan, Afghanistan, Transcaspia, Persia,' he wrote – 'to many these names breathe only a sense of utter remoteness or a memory of strange vicissitudes and of moribund romance. To me, I confess, they are the pieces on a chessboard upon which is being played out a game for the dominion of the world.'

Curzon's successors as players in the game are now the chief executives of Western oil companies and their rivals in Russia, China and Iran. To meet this latter group and their political bosses, Kleveman makes excursions into the three countries and what he finds is truly frightening. In Moscow, one of President Putin's men tells him that as soon as Russia has put its economy in order again, the army will be sent back into the Central Asian republics to put an end to the nonsense of their independence. A Chinese counterpart who outbids the Westerners in buying up Kazakhstan's oilfields tells him that China's future will soon depend on making sure that the oil and gas of the region will flow east, not west, while the Iranians hint that they might use Chechen separatists to blow up the Azerbaijan–Turkey pipeline now being built by BP. As for the Americans, they have set up military bases in several of the republics and seem determined to



develop the region as an alternative source of energy to the unreliable Middle East.

As I read the book, it gradually occurred to me that Kleveman owed his success not necessarily to his personal charm or perseverance but to the standing of a big television company behind him. In Kabul, he tells us, he is 'the only reporter in the VIP enclosure': freelancers are normally not even given a free ticket to the stadium. It was the company whose broadcasts President Clinton used to watch even in the lavatory next to his office lest he should miss a crucial event as it happened live – namely, CNN.

A small criticism is that the book could have done with at least one map. The publishers clearly thought that only oil executives and commentators on Central Asia would buy it and they already know exactly where Curzon's chess pieces lie.

A more serious criticism might be that the author sometimes gives uncritical coverage to the wildest theories of those Islamists who assert that America's main aim is to destroy Islam, not just to exploit the region's energy resources. Sometimes, too, his own views irritate. Take, for example, the following sentence from the epilogue: '[Many people] resent the immoral opportunism with which Washington courts the region's dictators.' The alternative would be to leave those same dictators with no other power to turn to except Russia, and we know how tender-hearted the Russians are.

However, these criticisms should not detract too much from what Lutz Kleveman has achieved. His reportage is first-class and his findings truly enlightening.

Literary Review Bookshop price £14.99, call 0870 429 6608.