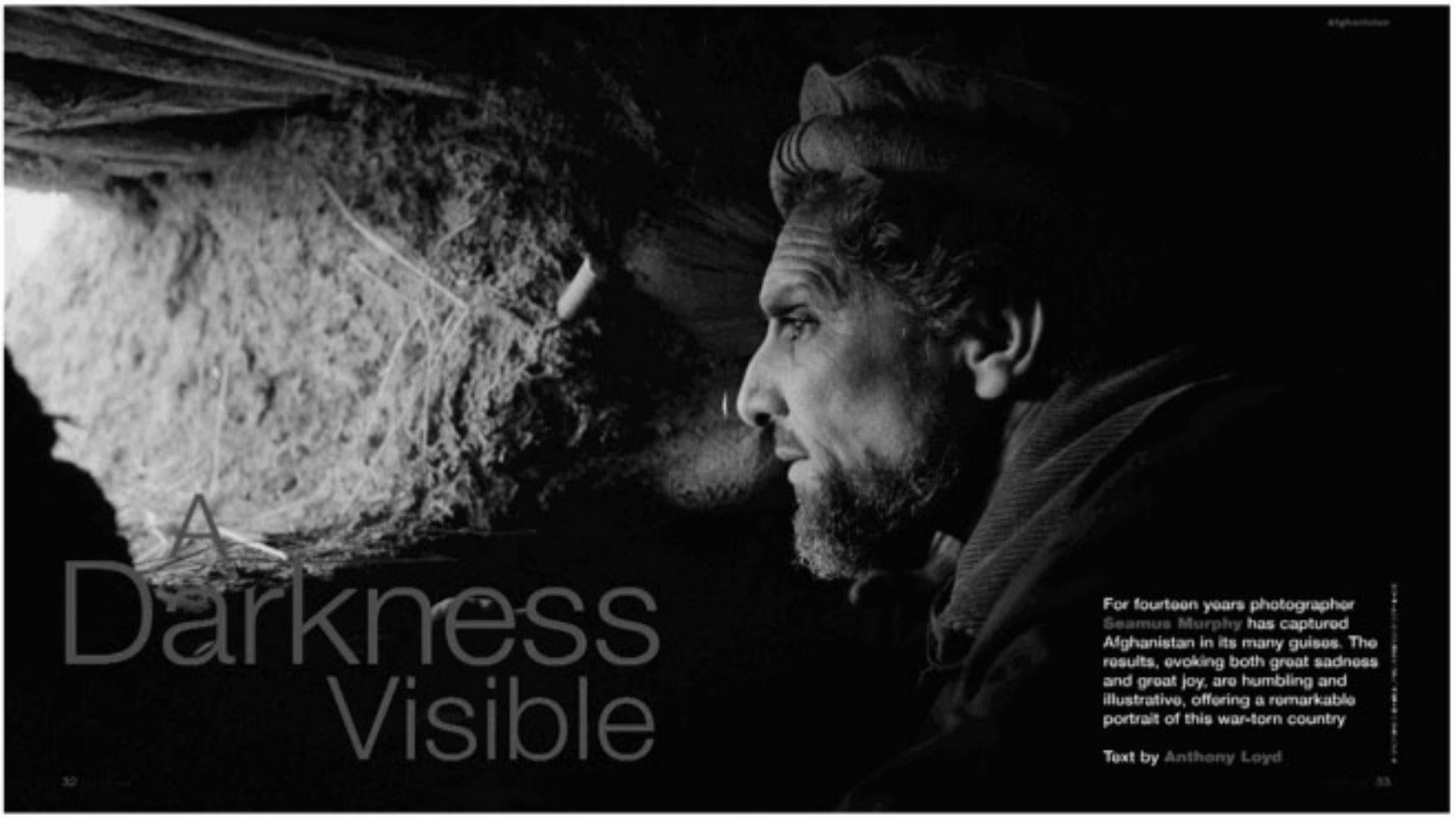

A Darkness Visible

For fourteen years photographer Seamus Murphy has captured Afghanistan in its many guises. The results, evoking both great sadness and great joy, are humbling and illustrative, offering a remarkable portrait of this war-torn country

Text by Anthony Loyd

the majority being for hotels, banks and the regional airline, the likely niche readership seems clear. That said, about half the copies go east, mainly to Kazahkstan and Kyrgystan and a few to Uzbekhistan, although Kelaart slightly wistfully adds that in the latter distribution is rudimentary. Readers have been ordering from all over the world, she says, and response has been 'really good, with only positive feedback.' She says the main thing is that they are enjoying running the magazine and in what they are finding to go into it. This enthusiasm comes across in the freshness of feel to Steppe, which, although committed to a specialist niche readership, is a magazine which is putting its best foot forward. OL

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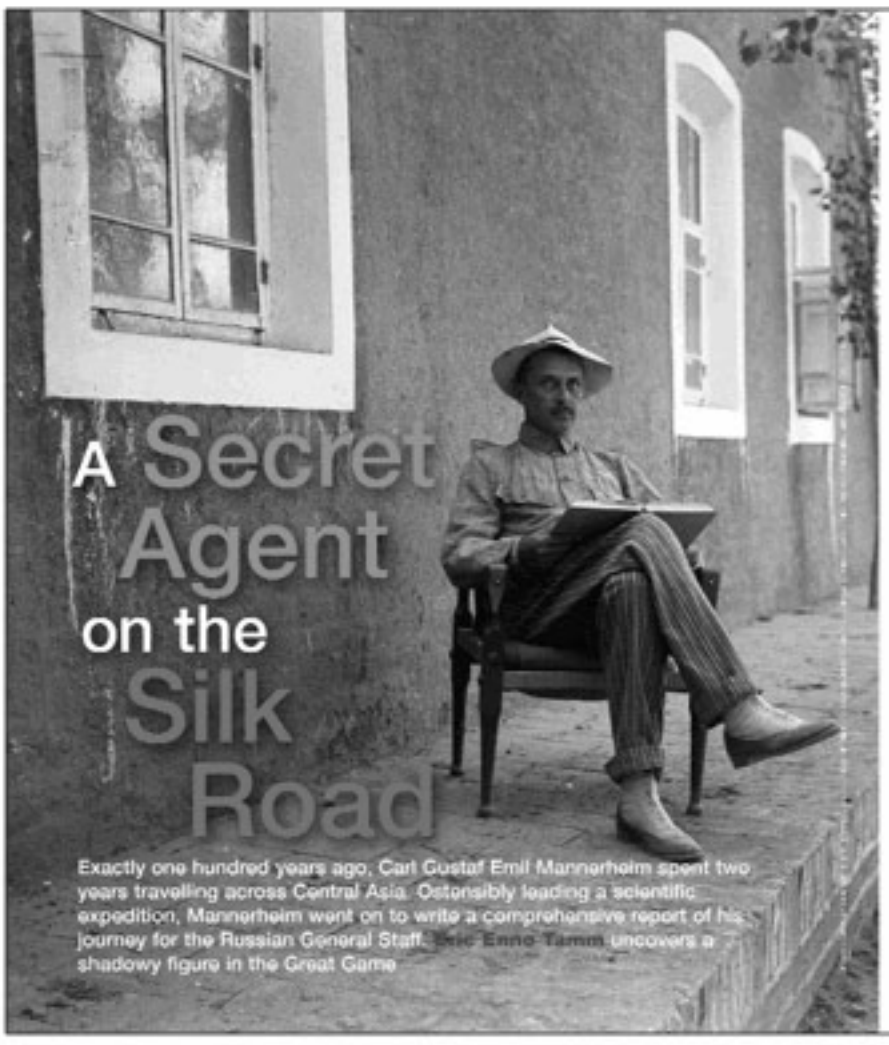

A Secret Agent on the Silk Road

Exactly one hundred years ago, Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim spent two years travelling across Central Asia. Ostensibly leading a scientific expedition, Mannerheim went on to write a comprehensive report of his journey for the Russian General Staff. Eric Enno Tamm uncovers a shadowy figure in the Great Game

Mannerheim

Perhaps the best-known Finn in history, Marshal Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim was a hero and cavalry officer. White Army general, liberator of his country, commander-in-chief during World War II, one of the greatest military strategists of the twentieth century, statesman, President of the Republic, and defender and hero to his people. Lesser known, however, is his role as an intrepid explorer and imperial spy for Tsar Nicolas II in the Great Game.

From 1906 to 1908, Baron Mannerheim – whose Chinese name, according to an official visa stamped in his passport, was Ma Daluo (The horse that leaps through the clouds) – undertook a lavish journey across the then little known world of Central Asia and China, starting in St Petersburg and ending in present-day Beijing. He travelled some 11,000 km, mostly on horseback, accompanied by a small band of Cossack soldiers and a capricious interpreter.

After two years, he returned to St Petersburg and personally debriefed the tsar about his trip. He wrote up his strategic investigations in a secret report to the Russian General Staff, but it was not until 1940 that his travel diary was published, along with 307 photographs. Reviewing *Across Asia from West to East in 1906–1908*,

'THE SUN BURNT ME, MY HEAD FELT HEAVIER THAN USUAL AND I HAD AN ALMOST IRRESISTIBLE INCLINATION TO LIE DOWN UNDER A TREE AND GIVE UP RIDING ANY FURTHER'

Sven Hedin, one of the greatest of the Silk Road explorers, stated that Mannerheim was assured 'a place of honour in the exploration of a great continent, a place of honour which in reality belonged to him thirty years ago'. Yet the book, published during World War II, never hugely unsettled at the time and became a mere footnote to Asian studies.

Mannerheim's journey took him from St Petersburg to Moscow, south down the Volga River and across the Caspian Sea. 'Lights peep out from far and near, surrounded by the mysterious shapes of the hills, and illuminate endless rows of oil derricks that appear out of the dark earth like an army of ghostly creatures,' he wrote of his arrival by ship in Baku, the centre of the Caspian's oil boom a century ago. He then sailed to Krasnovodsk (now Turkmenbashi) and travelled by rail through the Silk Road oases of Bukhara, Samarkand, Tashkent and Osh, where he organised a caravan to take him over the Alai Mountains to China's westernmost outpost, Kashgar. From there he ventured along the southern edge of the Taklamakan Desert to Khotan and then

left: RUSSIAN LEGATION
Mannerheim posed on the terrace of the Legation at the Russian Legation in Kashgar. The Legation was formerly home to Sir Aurel Stein's rival Nikolai Petrovsky, who lived there for nine years from 1902. The Dalai Lama had a legation run by George Macartney, who kept an eye on Russian activities in the western borderlands of

me, my head felt heavier than usual and I had an almost irresistible inclination to lie down under a tree and give up riding any further,' he wrote about reaching Kashgar. 'In vain I tried to refresh myself with a few succulent peaches. My mouth was parched and my tongue stuck to my throat and gums.' Yet it was not just the geography and climate that were hostile. Writing about his visit to the Tibetan monastery town of Labrang, Mannerheim describes one ironic encounter. 'The barefooted lamas, dressed in red, appeared on all sides like an army of ants. Shouting, yells, shouts, etc.'

The scientific expedition was just a cover. Its real purpose was not ethnography but espionage. Mannerheim was no scholar, but a thirty-nine-year-old colonel in the Russian army (Finland was a Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire at the time). He was one of the last secret agents of the war in the Great Game being played out by the Great Powers in Central Asia at the end of nineteenth century. His veritable trans-Asiatica was a series of duelling empires – Japanese, Chinese, British and Russian – whose shadowy agents played cat and mouse for military and

between Russian Turkestan, China and British India. The adversarial relationship between Petrovsky and Macartney was notorious, and in 1890 Petrovsky enjoyed something of a Mannerheim-like coup when, on a mission to call on two Kirghiz chiefs, the epitome of intrigue of the Pamirs campaigns, Mannerheim arrived unannounced