

The Invasion God Stopped?

Why did 17 Chinese Communist divisions retreat with victory in their grasp?

By Marshall O. Zaslove

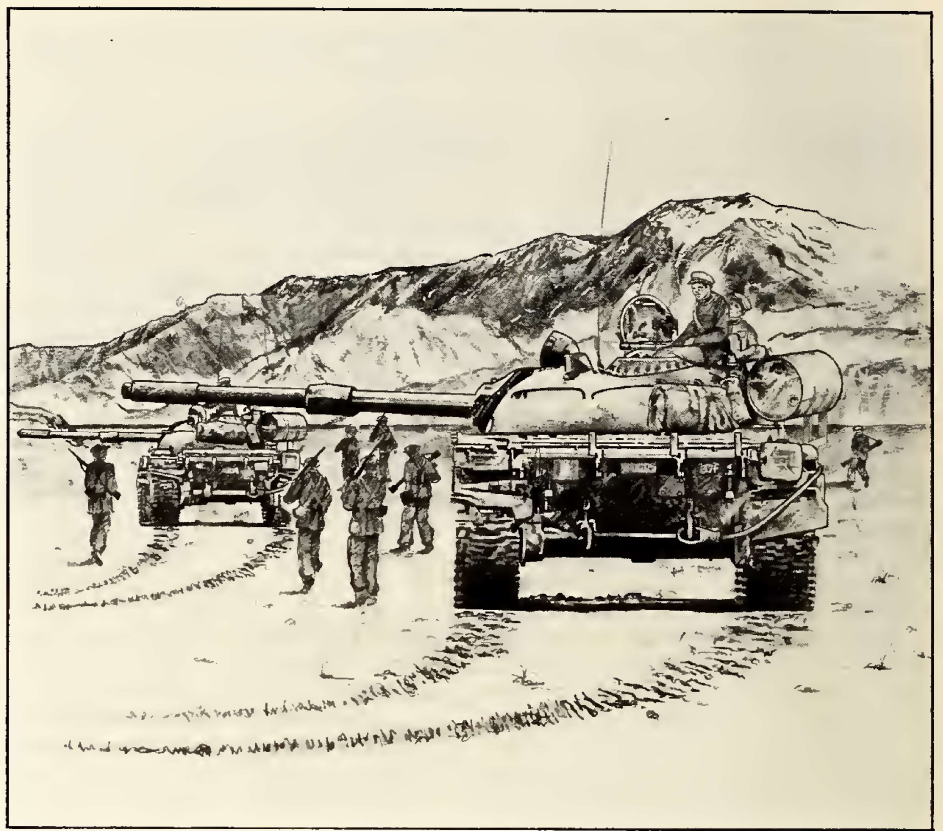
October 1962 was a time for notable men: Kennedy was in the White House, "A Man For All Seasons" was playing on Broadway, and "Lawrence of Arabia" was on at the movies.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the earth, one third of the human race was going to war. How that war was stopped just may be the most puzzling event in modern military history. Or the most inspiring.

The Chinese Communists had stood poised for three years on the northern border of India. Since "liberating" Tibet, they had been building roads across the Himalayas for the support of an invasion. India, safe for thousands of years behind a 16,000-foot-high natural barrier, now lay open to attack from the north.

The Chinese army was the biggest in the world: a horde of 2.6 million men equipped with modern arms. Seventeen special mountain warfare divisions had for years been acclimating themselves to fighting in the thin Himalayan air.

According to political analysts, Peking hoped an attack southward would



Monday, Nov. 21, 1962: the news wire began to hum with an incredible message—the Communist Chinese army was withdrawing from India.

end India's leadership in Asia. The humiliation of India—the world's largest democracy and its most devoutly religious nation—as well as the conquest of Nepal, Bhutan and oil-rich Assam were glittering prizes beckoning to the Communists.

India stood naked against the Chinese assault, her combat divisions already committed and pinned down along the nervous border with Pakistan. The troops that rushed to defend India's northern territories came from the flatlands and were poorly trained for mountain warfare. Some arrived at the freezing mountain outposts without even a blanket.

On October 20, several divisions of Chinese infantry and tanks stormed into Indian territory. The war was on. The invaders overran everything in their path, paused to regroup, and moved again. Long troop columns poured down out of the mountains toward the teeming plains of India.

Meanwhile the United States was having its own crisis. On October 22, President John F. Kennedy announced the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba. Alarmed also by this Sino-Indian war, which threatened one bil-

lion people, U.N. Ambassador Adlai Stevenson denounced China's "naked aggression." By the weekend, modern arms were being airlifted to India from England and the United States.

At the Himalayan battlefield, Communists attacked in "human waves," a tactic their commander, Gen. Lin Piao, had perfected against the U.S. Army in Korea. A reporter described the Chinese advancing over their own dead and wounded "like swarms of red ants," until the defenders simply ran out of ammunition. Desperate Indian troops fought back fiercely, sometimes even barehanded, but the Chinese onslaught could not be stopped—not by military means.

On October 23, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru announced, "India is not going to lose this war, however long it lasts and whatever harm it may do us." India had just ended seven centuries of foreign rule; her people were in no mood to submit to defeat. The war with China looked to be long, bitter and dangerous.

In the Indian capital, people taped their windows to prevent shattering during air raids. Chinese living in India were interned or jailed. Rumors

circulated that Pakistan had been promised spoils by China, and was also about to attack India.

On October 26, Nehru declared a state of emergency, as any Western leader would. He called on his allies for more weapons, as any Western leader would. He personally took over as defense minister, as any Western leader would. And then Nehru did something no Western leader would: he called in the holy men to stop the Chinese army.

To understand Nehru's unusual tactic, you first have to understand a few things about Indians and about Nehru himself. Much more so than his counterpart in the United States or Europe, the average Indian citizen is steeped in ancient spiritual traditions. More than 99 percent of Indians believe in God. Indian politicians mix freely with spiritual leaders, who often have huge followings.

He had in his youth been a socialist and occasional critic of orthodox religion, yet Nehru, then 73, was also a student of things spiritual. He was an avid reader of three medieval poets—Amir Khusrau, Kabir and Nanak—considered to be divinely inspired by many of India.

The prime minister had the traditional Indian respect for men of God. He was fond of quoting from the Vedic hymn praising "sages who searched

with their heart's thought," and he once wrote, "What interests me more . . . is an attempt to discern what lay behind the external aspect of life."

Now he was hard-pressed, with his country sliding into panic before the Chinese juggernaut. In an unscheduled radio announcement on

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November 1, the prime minister said, "It is a game of life and death . . . of the nation, of the millions in this country."

Nehru was leading a spiritual nation suddenly plunged into a dangerous war. After running through all his political and military options, what more natural step for him to take than to mobilize India's greatest natural resource, her holy men?

So they came to the capital, and it was by all accounts a striking procession: mahatmas, yogis and swamis with flowing beards, saffron robes and piercing eyes—unnerving the gray-suited bureaucrats.

Tea was served and a few courtesies

exchanged before the government officials got down to the business of asking each holy man to aid his country by interceding spiritually to stop military catastrophe. Reporters—who might have misunderstood the proceedings—were excluded. The men of God were told to do whatever they could to help stop the Chinese invasion. They agreed to try.

The mahatmas and swamis of India went home to chant and burn incense. They told beads and recited the holy hymns. They prayed to the ancient gods and goddesses.

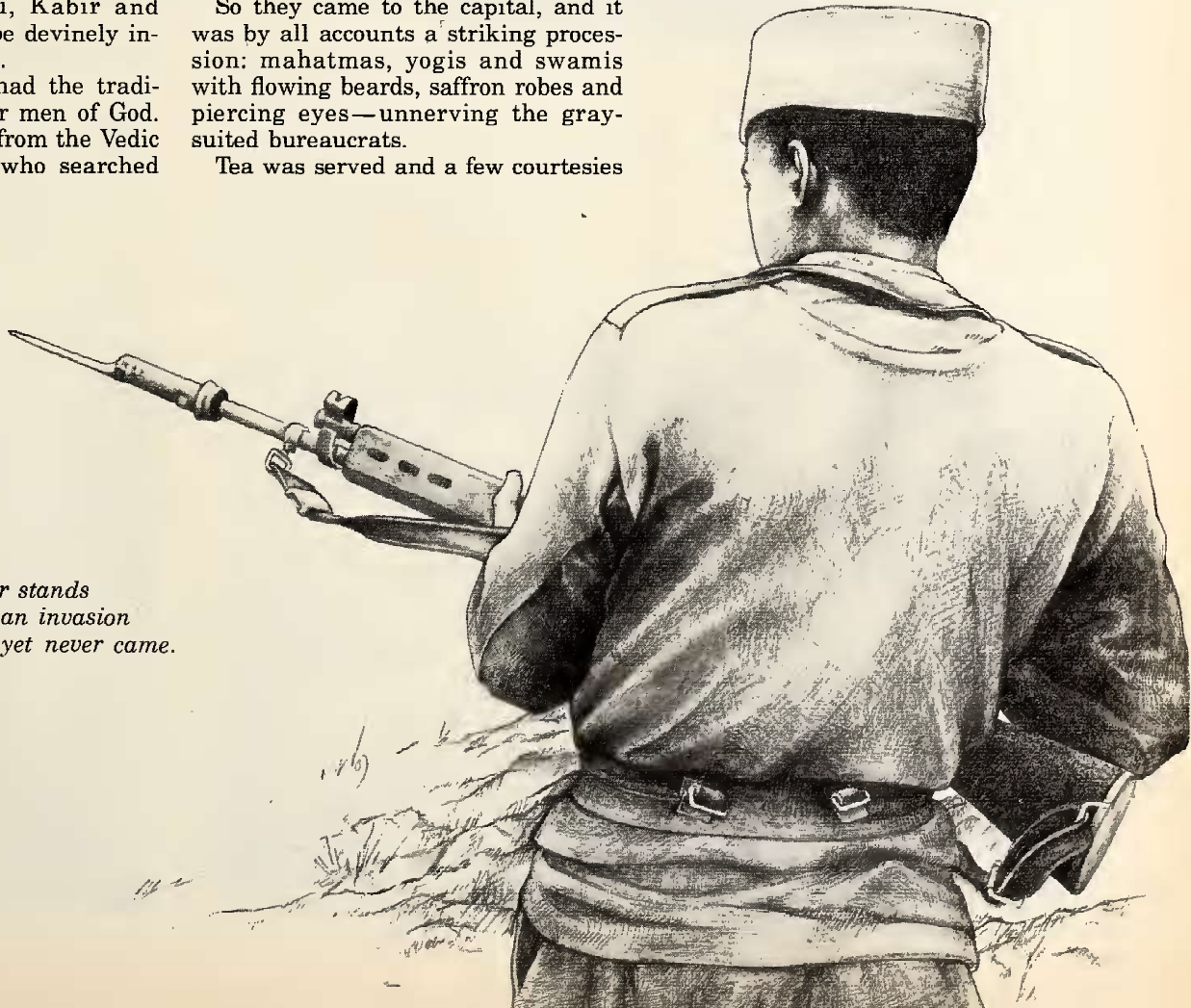
But the war grew worse.

In New Delhi there were now air raid blackouts, and people stored emergency supplies of food and water. Nehru's daughter Indira Gandhi was photographed turning in her precious gold bangles for melting down to help finance the war. The army called for 1 million volunteers, and in the streets and on the cricket pitches young men were drilling with WWI rifles.

Publicly, Nehru announced, "We are not going to tolerate this kind of inva-

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An armed Indian soldier stands ready to defend against an invasion that seemed imminent, yet never came.



Invasion

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sion by any foreign power." Privately, he met again with his advisers. Had they missed somebody? Had any great Indian holy man not yet been called on to help? he asked. Yes, there was one they hadn't called: Kirpal Singh.

If any man was ever qualified to step onto the stage of history at this moment, it was Kirpal Singh. He understood war, having served with the Indian military for 36 years until retiring in 1948 as deputy assistant controller of military accounts. He was an international figure, the first non-Christian ever awarded the Order of Saint John of Jerusalem by the Knights of Malta; he was president of the World Fellowship of Religions, and he convened the World Conference on Unity of Man.

Kirpal Singh not only talked about promoting peace worldwide, he was also a practical man of action. He met with Pope Paul VI and the Archbishop of the Greek Orthodox Church and told them, "Unity is the need of the hour." Afterwards, the Pope of Rome and the Patriarch of Constantinople got together, ending 11 centuries of schism in the church.

When the governor of the Tyrol was trying to prevent a civil war in that state, Kirpal Singh met with him for two hours and advised him. There was a riot, which subsided—but no war in the Tyrol. *Sant* Kirpal Singh, his hundreds of thousands of followers around the world called him and they considered him a saint, a man of great purity and devotion, capable of "miracles."

Born into the Sikh religion, he preached the oneness of all mankind. "We are all children of the one God," he insisted. He told all his followers—Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Jains, Buddhists, Sikhs,—"Stay in your own religion, but realize God during your lifetime."

And he practiced what he preached. In a nation where there seem to be more self-appointed prophets and so-called "gurus" than there are followers, Kirpal Singh stood out. He never accepted any donations and he lived entirely on his own salary or his pension. It was said he worked around the clock for the suffering and the poor—and for spiritually hungry people of all classes. And some said he never slept, another "miracle."

He was the confidant of Indian presidents, a friend of Prime Minister Nehru's sister Vijaya, and he was the only holy man ever invited to address

India's Parliament.

Now, in the war's darkest days, they summoned Kirpal Singh to the capital.

Could he possibly do something, anything, to turn back the Chinese invasion and save India from disaster? government officials asked.

No. He could do nothing, he told them. The officials were shaken. He could do *nothing*?

No, he could not do anything himself, Kirpal Singh said, but he would obediently pass on their request to Hazur ("Lord"). With relief, Nehru's men realized Kirpal Singh was speaking out of humility; a man of God, he actually saw everything being done by a power beyond himself. He was agreeing to help.

Those who met Kirpal Singh that day still remember being touched by his simple, yet kingly manner. From his eyes, life and hope itself seemed to bubble. There was no denying the spiritual majesty of the man, however much one might doubt that a retired military accounts officer could stop an invasion—singlehanded!

Kirpal Singh went back to his dwelling and kept his promise to the officials. He passed on to Hazur their request for an end to the invasion.

Monday, November 21: the war was in its fifth week. The Chinese Communist army stood on the plains. Seventeen thousand square miles of Indian territory were under Chinese control. Fresh Chinese troops were spotted in action.

Suddenly the Reuters wire began to hum with an incredible message: "Communist China announced today that it was ordering a cease-fire along the entire Indian border at midnight tonight. . . ."

China was withdrawing her army from India. The war was over. Geopolitical experts were flabbergasted. "Startling and puzzling in the extreme," the *New York Times* called China's decision to end the war unilaterally. "It comes with military victory in the Chinese Reds' hands. It is hard to believe that anything could have stopped them . . . until some satisfactory explanation is forthcoming, there can only be wild speculation on the reason for Peking's decision."

For 20 years there has never been any "satisfactory explanation."

In New Delhi panic gave way first to disbelief, then to relief. Nehru, ill and broken by the stress of events, called *Sant* Kirpal Singh to his bedside. He

had never thought much about God before, the ailing prime minister told friends afterward, but meeting Kirpal Singh had changed him.

The Chinese withdrew behind their 1959 borders and have not invaded India again. Nehru died in 1964, to be succeeded later by his daughter, Indira Gandhi, who visited Kirpal Singh often for help and inspiration. *Sant* Kirpal Singh died in 1974 and was succeeded by his son Darshan, who carries on his father's mission.

Many explanations for the sudden Chinese withdrawal have been advanced, but none can stand scrutiny.

Winter weather? No. It had been planned for by the Chinese (unlike the Indian army, their troops wore special clothing). In any event the Communists could easily have held onto their gains until spring.

Military aid? No. Help had been promised to India, but the bulk of it—including jet aircraft—did not arrive until after the Chinese cease-fire.

World opinion? No. Distraction by the U.S.-Soviet face-down in Cuba, and confusion over Chinese claims that India had attacked her first, kept the outside world from influencing China—if it really ever had.

Did the Communist army withdraw because it had achieved its military goals? No. Assam's oil wells would have made China independent of Soviet petroleum and they lay only 25 miles ahead of the Communists' farthest forward positions.

So what power forced the Chinese to make a sudden about-face and leave India after years of preparing for and weeks of waging a brilliantly successful war? Could it actually have been the prayer of this humble man of God, this *Sant*, to his Lord, his Hazur? Is it possible that the man Kirpal Singh somehow saved India from a disastrous war?

He himself was the first to deny it: "I did nothing," he always maintained.

Commenting on China's unexpected and unexplained withdrawal, the *New York Times* concluded: "The temptation at the moment is not to look a gift horse in the mouth, but once all of us recover from this surprise we will have to discover the real reasons. The Chinese Communists, after all, do not believe in Santa Claus."

Had he known, he might have added that the people of India do believe—in *Sants*. And *Sants*, in the power of prayer. ☪