

Playing the Great Game: Britain, War and Politics in Afghanistan since 1839

Review Number:

1443

Publish date:

Thursday, 4 July, 2013

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ISBN:

9780709091967

Date of Publication:

2012

Price:

£30.00

Pages:

448pp.

Publisher:

Robert Hale

Publisher url:

http://www.halebooks.com/display.asp?K=9780709091967&sf1=sort_date&st1=20120701%3A20120601&sf2=lcod

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

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The historical literature on Afghanistan and the various armed conflicts fought on its soil has greatly increased in recent years, due to the tragic events following the American-led invasion of the country in October 2001. Indeed, the ongoing war against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Central Asia has generated a vast output of popular and scholarly works on previous Afghan military campaigns, openly designed to educate both the public and political authorities on the risks and opportunities facing NATO forces in that complex region of the world.⁽¹⁾ These works are often entertaining and well written, presenting an easy to read but accurate depiction of recent Afghan history and claiming to offer valuable political or military ‘lessons’ to the current effort of the international community in Kabul and Kandahar. Edmund’s Yorke’s *Playing the Great Game* pertains clearly to this kind of ‘didactic’ literature, analysing in detail the four major conflicts fought by Britain in Afghanistan since 1839 and emphasizing the role of ‘excessive political interference or simply political negligence’ in the conduct of these bitter wars in the heart of Asia (p. 10).

The book is the product of almost 40 years of research on the subject and opens with a short introduction by Brigadier Ed Butler, former commander of British forces in Helmand Province in 2006, who uses his direct experience of Afghan warfare to reinforce Yorke’s argument in favour of a clearer understanding of the strategic and political blunders made by Britain in her previous military adventures on the Hindu Kush mountains. He remarks, for example, the persistence of sheer political ignorance on the complex ‘tribal tapestry’ of Afghan society and the need to involve local civilians in the economic reconstruction of their

country, seen as the only way to resolve 'this latest, intractable Great Game' in Central Asia (p. 7). Yorke concurs with these general considerations, and he aims in his study to not neglect the 'Afghan voice' of the various Anglo-Afghan conflicts, and to reveal the crucial role played by 'Afghan collaborators, allies and trading communities' in the success or failure of British military campaigns in the region from the mid 19th century to these days. This is done clearly to underline 'the importance of the Afghan people themselves' for the creation of a new 'democratic Afghanistan' in the near future (pp. 11–12). He also proposes to discuss Britain's wars in Afghanistan in the international context of their own time, highlighting the long diplomatic struggle between Britain and Russia for the control of Central Asia and its negative impact on British civil-military relations during the various Afghan campaigns. Indeed, he believes that the inability of British politicians to 'sufficiently resource and manage' these conflicts, driven often by strict geopolitical reasons, explains quite well some of the humiliating setbacks suffered by British troops in Afghanistan in the last two centuries, including the recent difficulties faced by Brigadier Butler's men in Helmand Province (p. 10–11).

Thus Yorke presents his work as 'a revisionist interpretation' of the main campaigns of the four Anglo-Afghan wars, hoping to shed 'fresh new light' upon these tragic and often controversial events (p. 11). However, this ambitious goal is never fully realized in the text, which remains instead generally stuck in the conventional forms of imperial military history, full of spectacular battles and romantic examples of British heroism under fire. Far from being properly valorised, the 'Afghan voice' ends up quite marginalised in this particular kind of narrative, mainly focused on the discussion of British martial virtues (or tactical mistakes), while even the interesting perspective on diplomatic conflicts and civil-military relations suffers some sort of relapse in the central part of the book, partially obscured by the (critical) narrative of Lord Roberts' Afghan victories in 1878–80. It does not seem to be a problem of sources, because Yorke uses with great skill a considerable range of different archival materials in support of his analysis, including court martial minutes, regimental records, private diaries of Indian sepoys, and oral interviews with serving British officers in Afghanistan. It seems instead to be a problem of balance, because conventional military events like sieges or battles are too often prioritised in place of other important cultural and political considerations, including the key role of local Afghan collaborators in the British war effort or the constant conflict between London and Simla on the definition of British strategic policies toward Central Asia. This clearly limits the efficacy of Yorke's revisionist approach, making his book more traditional than originally intended.

To be fair, *Playing the Great Game* starts very well, with a detailed and thoroughgoing analysis of the First Anglo-Afghan War (1838–42) modelled on the classic scholarly works of J. A. Norris and M. A. Yapp.⁽²⁾ After having briefly introduced the complex geographical and ethnic landscape of Afghanistan, Yorke carefully highlights Britain's fears of Russian expansionism in Central Asia after the Napoleonic Wars, seen as a direct threat to her Indian possessions, which resulted in various diplomatic attempts to include the unstable but independent Afghan kingdom in the British sphere of influence in South Asia. The failure of these attempts finally prompted Lord Auckland, the Governor General of India, to launch in 1838 a massive invasion of the country under the direct control of ambitious political officers like Alexander Burnes and Sir William MacNaghten. The main political goal of the campaign was to replace the current Amir Dost Mohammad, considered too 'philo-Russian', with the dethroned prince Shah Shuja Durrani, who was a friend and protégé of Ranjit Singh, the powerful Sikh emperor allied to the British in north-west India. As well noted by Yorke, the British invasion was from the beginning 'fraught with *political* let alone physical, difficulties' (p. 33), including the potentially hostile attitude of local peoples and inadequate logistical supplies, and it resulted in a long terrible march of British and Indian troops across the deserts and mountains of Sind and southern Afghanistan marked by hundreds of deaths from cholera, dysentery, sunstroke, and 'sheer exhaustion' (p. 36). Constantly harassed by bands of robbers and plunderers, the invading army was able to survive only thanks to the vital support of local Afghan traders, who profited rapaciously of the situation, applying 'exorbitant prices' to their provisions and reducing several British officers near to 'bankruptcy' (p. 45) 'The British exploiters became the exploited', observes Yorke poignantly (p. 42), and this dynamic interaction between Afghan civilians and British soldiers – constantly shaped by ambivalent feelings of cooperation and distrust – is one of the most intriguing and innovative aspects of his book, analysed quite well in all the first three chapters devoted to the fateful events of 1838–42.

Such a vital intercourse between Britons and Afghans reached new dramatic heights after the British occupation of Kabul in September 1839, which reinstated Shah Shuja on the Afghan throne after over three decades of 'bitter exile' (p. 57). Indeed, the early military successes of British troops against Dost Mohammed's forces gave way to a dangerous period of political overconfidence and logistical overstretch, aggravated by the faulty leadership of Burnes and MacNaghten, who antagonized with their arrogant attitude not only local Afghan chiefs but even the vast majority of British military officers serving in Afghanistan. Burnes' sexual affairs with Afghan women proved particularly outrageous for the people of Kabul, exasperated already by Shah Shuja's corrupt government and by the cut of public subsidies coming from the Indian government, and it is then no wonder that he became the first victim of the great insurrection of November 1841, which put the local British garrison under the weak leadership of Major-General William Elphinstone in a very desperate situation, isolated and surrounded by 1000s of furious armed rebels. Making effective use of the original journals of Lady Florentia Sale, one of the key civil witnesses of those tragic events, Yorke analyses in detail the gradual collapse of the garrison's morale and command structure, undermined both by Elphinstone's tactical blunders and by MacNaghten's political intrigues with rebel leaders, which paved the way to its final catastrophic retreat from the city in January 1842, popularly known as one of the greatest military disasters of the Victorian era. Indeed, the large part of the retreating column was literally slaughtered by the rebels on the road to Jalalabad, with 'scores of frozen, demoralized [Indian] sepoys' deserting their units in the vain hope of salvation (p. 135). Although the British later avenged this humiliating defeat with a brutal 'retribution' campaign led by Generals Nott and Pollock, which resulted in the death of hundreds of Afghan villagers and the destruction of the Grand Bazaar of Kabul, the damage to Britain's position in Afghanistan was clearly irreversible. In the end, Dost Mohammed was restored to the Afghan throne, marking the complete defeat of Lord Auckland's 'regime change' policy, while the partial 'loss of British prestige' in the region after the conflict probably contributed to the outbreak of the Indian Mutiny of 1857, adding another negative legacy to the tragic events of the early 1840s (p. 228). Ironically, Dost Mohammed proved a sincere ally of Britain on this occasion, refusing to side with the mutineers and maintaining a strict military neutrality for all the period of the insurrection. For many British officers such a decision was crucial for the fate of the rebellion, allowing their forces to recover from initial tactical setbacks and preventing any serious 'embarrassment' along the turbulent Indian-Afghan frontier (p. 229).

In 1878, however, war broke out again between Britain and Afghanistan, nurtured by the steady advance of Russian power in Central Asia. Fearing a growth of Russian political influence in Kabul, the new Viceroy of India, Lord Lytton, decided to compel Amir Sher Ali to accept a permanent diplomatic British mission at his court, designed to informally control Afghan foreign policy and to prevent any possible Russian thrust toward the Indian frontier. When Sher Ali refused Lytton's proposals, the ambitious Viceroy literally 'bullied' the Disraeli's Cabinet into starting a military campaign against Afghanistan, using the 'insolent reply' sent by the Amir to Lytton's arrogant political claims (pp. 234-5). As well pointed out by Yorke, the following war was completely 'unnecessary' and it resulted again in a terrible high 'price' in human lives for both countries (p. 235). Led by talented commanding officers like Lieutenant-General Donald Stewart and Major-General Frederick Roberts, British troops easily defeated Sher Ali's forces, forcing the unlucky Amir to comply to Lytton's requests, but the British diplomatic mission in Kabul led by Sir Pierre Louis Cavagnari was later massacred by an angry mob of mutinous soldiers, provoking another British military invasion of Afghanistan in 1879. In retaliation for Cavagnari's murder, Lytton gave to his military commanders 'one of the most draconian and indiscriminate sets of instructions' in the history of the British Empire, virtually contemplating 'total war' against the entire Afghan people (p. 259). These instructions were pedantically applied by Roberts throughout his military operations on the Hindu Kush, despite the outrage of British public opinion at home and the dissent of political officers on the field, and it resulted in the summary execution of 100s of civilians, together with the indiscriminate burning of local villages and the widespread torture of suspect enemy soldiers. Needless to say, all this aimless violence provoked the outbreak of 'a full-scale *jihad*' (p. 272) against British troops, which Roberts was barely able to survive thanks to his tactical skill and the vital help of Afghan collaborators like the Hazara and the Qizilbash, who constantly provided key intelligence and logistical support to their British allies.

Unfortunately, this important example of cooperation between Afghan civilians and British soldiers is only briefly sketched in Yorke's narrative, which focuses instead too much on Roberts' battles and tactical manoeuvres, partially neglecting the political and cultural dimension of the conflict. Indeed, the participation of the Hazara and Qizilbash in the war should have been treated more extensively in the book, enlightening the historical complexity of Anglo-Afghan confrontations and finally offering that local perspective on the topic initially claimed by the author as one of the main aspects of his revisionist interpretation. Moreover, the great public debate over Roberts' 'retributive' policies in Afghanistan should also have been discussed in more detail, underlining the civil-military strain provoked by Lytton's harsh directives on the conduct of the campaign. The issue is worthy of attention, considering especially the current polemical debates on NATO operations in Afghanistan, and it could have provided another original perspective to the book, emphasizing the serious challenges posed by faraway 'small wars' to democratic states and the role played by the press in shaping modern political-military relations.

The Second Anglo-Afghan War ended in 1880 with 'a political and territorial stalemate' (p. 317): a new Amir, Abdur Rahman, was firmly established in Kabul thanks to huge British financial subsidies, but Afghanistan continued to represent a serious problem for Britain, due to the general instability of the country and the constant threat of Russian expansion in Central Asia. Indeed, diplomatic tensions with St. Petersburg over the region continued to dominate Britain's foreign policy well into the First World War, despite the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907, and they reached new heights after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917-18, which threatened to spread Communist or anti-imperialist ideas in the Indian subcontinent.⁽³⁾ Coupled with the rise of a powerful pan-Islamic movement across South Asia and the Middle East, these renewed fears over the security of India led to the outbreak of a third Anglo-Afghan conflict in 1919, started by the domestic troubles of the new Amir Amanullah, who had to proclaim a jihad against Britain to avoid a general rebellion of tribal chiefs against his faltering political authority. Yorke describes quite well this short and limited frontier war fought by Britain with extremely limited resources, due to the general demobilization of troops after the end of the Great War, and he also highlights in detail the 'continuing crisis of morale' (p. 347) affecting British forces in Afghanistan, anxious to be repatriated and irritated by the inconclusive strategic policies of their superiors. In the end, Britain won all the battles but lost the war, because Amanullah was able to use the conflict as propaganda to win back the favour of several prominent tribal elders across the country. Moreover, the British government did not want to intervene directly in Afghan affairs, due to the general decline of its political and military power after the World War, and it made even some significant diplomatic concessions to the Amir at the peace table, including the formal abandonment of any control over Afghanistan's foreign policy. As Yorke points out, this hasty decision had serious consequences for the future of the British Raj, compelling Britain's forces to fight 'another quarter century' of bitter campaigns on the North-West Frontier and allowing the development of a lawless tribal area between India and Afghanistan open to the influence of Islamic fundamentalist ideas (p. 355).

And such an area is one of the main theatres of operation of the current NATO campaign in Afghanistan, well outlined in the last chapter of the book. Thanks to his direct contacts with several British military officers serving in the region, Yorke is in fact able to reconstruct in detail all the main problems faced by the international coalition in its long struggle against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, including the widespread corruption of the Karzai government and the complex ethnic nature of modern Afghan politics. Moreover, he highlights effectively the logistical weakness, political confusion, and strategic complacency of Britain's forces in Afghanistan, unable to develop long-term plans for the reconstruction of the country and often compelled to follow blindly the aggressive policies of their American allies. This general lack of vision and purpose, coupled with a faulty understanding of local cultural and political values, led to the disastrous Helmand campaign of 2006, which resulted in heavy casualties and in a humiliating retreat from the town of Musa Qala after a series of failed negotiations with the Taliban. This last event finally compelled the British government to rethink substantially its patchy Afghan policy, adopting a more elaborate strategy of regional stabilization and ethnic pacification. Despite some 'limited but significant progress' in this direction (p. 399), however, the situation still remains extremely precarious today, with the ongoing risk of a complete 'political and military quagmire' not dissimilar from those of the previous Anglo-Afghan wars (p. 406). As

Yorke emphatically concludes, ‘there has never been and never will be a purely external military solution to the Afghanistan problem’, and Britain should accept the main lessons of her long historical involvement in Central Asia and to adopt ‘a long-term military containment, stabilization and development [policy]’ in support of a broad ‘regionally based political solution’ of the Afghan question (p. 415). One could hope that such a perceptive and constructive suggestion will not fall on deaf ears, avoiding the repetition of those bloody political-military disasters of the past evoked in the pages of this complex and fascinating book.

Notes

1. Among the ever-growing list of publications on the subject, see for example David Loyn, *Butcher and Bolt: Two Hundred Years of Foreign Engagement in Afghanistan* (London, 2008); Jules Stewart, *Crimson Snow: Britain’s First Disaster in Afghanistan* (Stroud, 2008); and Rodric Braithwaite, *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan, 1979–1989* (London, 2011). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. J. A. Norris, *The First Afghan War, 1838–1842* (Cambridge, 1967); M. A. Yapp, *Strategies of British India: Britain, Iran, and Afghanistan, 1798–1850* (Oxford and New York, 1980). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. On the persistence of the Anglo-Russian ‘Great Game’ after 1907, see Jennifer Siegel, *Endgame: Britain, Russia and the Final Struggle for Central Asia* (London and New York, 2002). [Back to \(3\)](#)

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