

## TAJIKISTAN AND THE HIGH PAMIRS (Odyssey - Second edition 2011)

### Extract from Chapter *The Great Game – myth or reality?* (pp.295-330)

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“Listen in the north, my boys, there's trouble on the wind;  
Tramp o' Cossack hooves in front, gray great-coats behind,  
Trouble on the Frontier of a most amazin' kind,  
Trouble on the waters o' the Oxus!”  
Rudyard Kipling, *Soldiers Three*

“More people debated the Great Game than ever played it.”  
John Keay *When Men and Mountains Meet*, p. 140

The expression ‘Great Game’, describing the rivalry between the British and Russian Empires for influence, control and expansion of territory in Central Asia in the nineteenth century was coined by Lieutenant Arthur Conolly (1807-1842), a British Political Officer<sup>1</sup> of the 6th Bengal Native Light Cavalry, who initiated British reconnaissance and map making in the region and was executed along with fellow British officer Charles Stoddart by the Emir of Bukhara in 1842. In 1837, he wrote two letters to his fellow ‘Political’, Henry Rawlinson (one of the most distinguished ‘players’ in the Great Game as soldier, archaeologist, explorer and historian – at that time a Lieutenant, but later a Major-General, knight and President of the RGS), in which he wrote: “You've a great game, a noble one, before you”;<sup>2</sup> and, in another letter: “If only the British Government would play the grand game.”

In 1837, Count Nesselrode, Russian Foreign Minister from 1822 to 1856, had created another highly appropriate term for this conflict, ‘Tournament of Shadows’, but it was the ‘Great Game’ that caught the popular imagination. The works of Rudyard Kipling, in particular *Kim*, published in 1901, revived enthusiasm for this period of empire and, almost a century later, the term took on a new life through the stirring tales recounted by, among others, John Keay in *The Gilgit Game*, published in 1979, Peter Hopkirk in *The Great Game: On Secret Service in High Asia* (1990), and Karl E. Meyer and Shareen Blair Brysac in *Tournament of Shadows: The Great Game and the Race for Empire in Asia* (1999).



<sup>1</sup> Political officers - many of whom were Army officers on secondment - were responsible for the civil administration of frontier districts in India.

<sup>2</sup> Rawlinson was at that time facing a Persian army in Kandahar and its Russian ‘advisers’.

Count Karl Robert Nesselrode (1780-1862)  
([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karl\\_Nesselrode](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karl_Nesselrode))

If the object of the contest was hardly different from what was taking place simultaneously in the 'scramble for Africa' and elsewhere around the globe, attention was drawn to Central Asia by concerns in press and Parliament in Britain about threats to India, the jewel in the Crown of the British Empire, and by the publication of the adventures of many of the colourful characters involved. Central Asia was also associated with the Silk Road and with names and places redolent of romance and mystery. In one of his more poetic moments, on the Dorah Pass in the north-west of Chitral looking across the entrance to the Wakhan, Colonel Algernon Durand, British Agent in Gilgit from 1889-1894, described well the fascination that still attaches to Central Asia:

We stayed a short time at the top, looking out over the Badakshan mountains towards that mysterious Central Asia which attracts by the glamour of its past history, by the veil which shrouds its future. Balkh, Bokhara, Samarkhand, what visions come trooping as their names arise. The armies of Alexander, the hordes of Gengis Khan and Timur go glittering by; dynasties and civilisations rise and fall like the waves of the sea; peace and prosperity again and again go down under the iron hoof of the conqueror; for centuries past death and decay have ruled in the silent heart of Asia.<sup>3</sup>



([www.tertullian.org/rpearse/scanned/durand.htm](http://www.tertullian.org/rpearse/scanned/durand.htm))

The main theatre of Anglo-Russian rivalry was in and close to the Pamirs: the present-day frontiers in the region were determined as a result of the agreements reached by Russia and Britain during this crucial period in their relations.

### **Colonial policy**

The extension by Russia and Britain of their zones of influence in Central Asia was bound to bring the two Empires into a conflict over their respective interests. For the British, the primary concern was to find a sound 'scientific' defensive frontier for India, although the

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<sup>3</sup> *The Making of a Frontier*, Algernon Durand, London 1899, p. 88.

commercial consideration of finding markets to the north for the produce of India was also thrown into the equation. For the reformist Tsar Alexander II, after the Russian defeat in the Crimea War in 1854-56, the objective was to find new opportunities for territorial (and commercial) expansion in the only direction remaining, east.

As at other times, failure of Russia on the side of Europe was followed by a great advance on the line of least resistance in Asia, with enormous accessions of territory. When this advance had been left to the Cossacks and peasants, the line which it followed had passed due eastward, north of the centres of Asiatic population, to the Pacific. .... But in this reign takes place a purely military advance in another quarter, central Asia, in character quite unlike the penetration of Siberia, except in so far as the independent initiative of Russian generals might distantly recall the unfettered enterprise of the Cossacks. The way was cleared in 1859 by the surrender after a gallant resistance of the priest-prince Shamil, which brought to a close the long struggle against the gallant mountaineers of the Caucasus.<sup>4</sup>

Within ten years, Russia was well on the way to constituting a major empire in the east. Although the Russian move in this direction was certainly anticipated by British statesmen,<sup>5</sup> it was nevertheless viewed with consternation by a significant section of the press and public and – more particularly – those in the field in India. The next forty years were marked by the manoeuvring, manipulation, duplicity, courage, posturing, self-delusion, chivalry, brutality and sometimes plain recklessness that now go under the name of ‘Great Game’.

### Rules of the Game

For most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the definition of the role and frontiers of Afghanistan as a territory lying between the two Empires was of central importance in Anglo-Russian relations. Since the Treaty of Paris in 1763, Britain was the undisputed major power in India and, already in 1809, recognising the strategic position of Afghanistan, concluded a treaty with the Afghan Amir, Shah Shuja.



Shah Shuja Durrani (1785-1842) in his palace at Kabul

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Pares, *A History of Russia*, London 1965, p.428.

<sup>5</sup> In 1800, three months before his death, Tsar Paul had ordered the conquest of India.

British policy towards Afghanistan suffered from lack of consistency. While on the Russian side, General Kaufmann was Governor-General of Turkestan from 1867 until his death in 1882, there were, during this period, no fewer than five Viceroy of India; similarly, while the Tsar exercised autocratic rule in Russia, the same period saw three changes of government in Britain. If Russophobia was generally a constant in Britain during this period, there were conflicting opinions about whether imperial interests would be best protected against supposed Russian ambitions by an Afghanistan that was: a) an independent and centralised state with institutions that could withstand encroachment (or blandishments) from Russia; b) a weak client state, totally dependent on external military support and subsidy; c) a buffer whose territorial integrity was best protected by agreement between (and in the mutually acknowledged interests of) the two main protagonists; or d) totally dismembered and permanently weakened.



General Konstantin Petrovich von Kaufmann (1818-1882)  
(Pamir Archive – Markus Hauser)

Inextricably linked to the imperial rivalry was the perception that most of Central Asia – and especially the Pamirs – was a ‘blank spot’ on the map: hence, as we shall see in later chapters, the central role of the explorer as a forerunner and agent of conquest and empire. This, combined with the declining ability of China to police its western frontiers and make good its territorial claims in Central Asia, gave urgency to laying down the markers of empire.

The Game was indeed one of high stakes: the players came into close territorial contact and friction was inevitable. The accounts of the main protagonists – and some histories of the period – suggest that this was a fraught and tense period in relations between the two Empires, during which, despite external courteous and ‘gentlemanly’ behaviour, ruthless intrigue was threatening peace and stability and that war was only narrowly avoided – the

blame for which was generally attributed to the other side of the border from that on which the observer was standing.

A dispassionate look at the official record of diplomatic intercourse between the two Powers, however, shows that, during the whole period, each behaved according to fairly clear and consistent rules. Formal and informal contacts were intense and business-like and each was truly concerned to minimise flashpoints.<sup>6</sup> As a consequence, there was never any real danger that their respective inroads in Central Asia would lead to armed conflict between them. The drama lay more in the contest between the ‘peace’ and ‘war’ factions within each country than in relations between the central governments themselves. In the British case, the determination of policy was complicated by differences of perception and judgement – sometimes extreme – between the government in London and the administration in Calcutta/Simla, as well as by some vociferous sections of Parliament and public opinion, fed by a jingoistic press.

Certainly, if anyone was having fun during this time, it was the adventurers on the ill-defined frontiers who enjoyed the free run given to them by their chiefs in the military and intelligence services to hunt and play ‘hide-and-seek’ in the wide open spaces of Central Asia. As Hopkirk notes there was, however, a difference of approach between the two sides: “... in the coming years, ‘scientific expeditions’ were frequently to serve as covers for Russian Great Game activities, while the British preferred to send their officers, similarly engaged, on ‘shooting leave’, thus enabling them to be disowned if necessary.”<sup>7</sup> Of course, the explorers on both sides made significant contributions to geographical knowledge, but both Russians and British saw success in Central Asia as a basis for building reputations and careers; in the case of the Russians – in the early years of Central Asian conquest, at least – by sometimes exceeding their orders; in the case of the British, self-promotion was achieved through the somewhat unseemly rush to publish personal accounts of adventure and survival in exotic places.<sup>8</sup> Harold Nicolson, the sympathetic biographer of one of the most intrepid among them, Lord Curzon, referred, for example, to “the valuably portentous books which he published on his return.”<sup>9</sup>

The Pamir expeditions of the Russians almost always incorporated a serious scientific component and, whatever their other aims, brought back major contributions to cartography, botany, zoology, glaciology, ethnology and linguistics. Other travellers noted this also in their encounters with the Russians: Wilhelm Filchner, a Lieutenant in the Royal Bavarian Infantry, for example, noted on his way to the Pamirs in 1900<sup>10</sup> that the Russians had a highly professional cartographic department in Tashkent and a well-equipped astronomical observatory in Marghilan, where he was surprised to see that the main telescope had been made in Hamburg. Filchner further remarked that the Russian road from Osh was well-provided with regular distance (verst) markers and that the Pamirsky Post (the Russian military base at present-day Murghab) at the end of the road already had a meteorological station where readings were taken three times a day, even though the base had only been in existence since 1893 and the fort was not built there until 1895.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, when Filchner

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<sup>6</sup> For the period 1836-1844 in particular, cf Ingle Harold N., *Nesselrode and the Russian Rapprochement with Britain, 1836-1844*, University of California Press, London 1976, pp. 118-120 and *passim*.

<sup>7</sup> Hopkirk, *The Great Game*, p.204.

<sup>8</sup> As we shall see later in Chapter 5, Ney Elias was a notable exception to this practice and his career probably suffered as a result.

<sup>9</sup> Harold Nicolson, *Curzon: The Last Phase 1919-1925 – A Study in Post-War Diplomacy*, London 1934, p. 27.

<sup>10</sup> Wilhelm Filchner, *Ein Ritt über den Pamir*, Berlin 1903, p. 33.

<sup>11</sup> Murghab still has a functioning meteorological station and, surprising as it may seem, there are still websites that provide the weather forecast for the high Pamir plateau (e.g. <http://www.weatheronline.co.uk/Tadschikistan/Murghab.htm>).

arrived at Pamirsky Post, a Polish professor, B. Stankewitsch, had just been assigned there to make scientific measurements.



Photo by Wilhelm Filchner showing Prof. Stankewitsch (2<sup>nd</sup> from left)

The Great Game was a story of personalities, of whom the most visible were the men on the spot. Seen against the wider canvas of British-Russian relations in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, their influence on events was marginal: their actions were the pin-pricks on the edge of empire, frequently provoking temporary flare-ups of tension but rarely achieving any fundamental change of direction. Several of the players were considered by their political superiors as loose cannons and were frequently the object of their wrath – and sometimes even disavowed publicly, as was the darling of the British public, Younghusband, for his appalling massacre of Tibetans in 1904. Their flamboyance and the daring of their adventures has tended to obscure the actions (often out of the public gaze) of their political and military masters at the centre of power, whose decisions determined the outcome of the Game.

### Anglo-Russian flashpoints

Russian expansion in Central Asia was viewed from the outset with much suspicion by the British. In 1865, Rawlinson .....

*1837-41 – Persia and the first Afghan War*

Anglo-Russian rivalry in Central Asia goes back at least as far as the Treaty of Turkomanchai in 1828, .....

*1859-1873 – Russian territorial expansion*

As noted, Tsar Alexander II had approved early in his reign a strategy of military expansion in Central Asia. His advisers .....

*1873 – the first Pamirs Border Agreement*

During the period up to 1873, there were active negotiations between the British and Russians with a view to reducing tension in the region. In 1869, .....

*1876-1881 – British ‘forward policy’ and the second Afghan war*

The response by the British Conservative government to the Amir’s ‘infidelity’ in dealing with the Russians was .....



From: Fred Burnaby, *A Ride to Khiva: Travels and Adventures in Central Asia*. New York, Harper & Brothers, 1877. (Markus Hauser – Pamir Archive)

*1882-1890 – “Scientific” frontiers*

After a brief pause, Russian territorial gains again became a major source of concern to Britain. In 1882, .....

*The Pamir incident*

A few flashpoints remained. One lay in the eastern Wakhan, where a further crisis occurred in 1891. In 1888, a Russian officer had reached Hunza .....

*1892-1907 – Crisis management and the settlement of frontiers*

The outcome of the incidents described above shows that, despite public protest and the clamour of many of the players of the ‘Great Game’, .....

Thus, after several abortive attempts over the previous quarter of a century, the frontiers that hold today in the Pamirs were fixed: with the exception of a minor (but bloody) extension in Tibet a few years later in which Younghusband was involved, the Great Game was over. An Anglo-Russian Convention was signed in St. Petersburg on 31 August 1907, settling boundaries and reducing tensions in relation to Persia, Afghanistan and Tibet. Despite some sabre-rattling on both sides, the Convention held until other priorities brought the parties even closer in 1914.<sup>12</sup> Here again, the Russians professed bewilderment that the British continued to accuse them of sinister designs on India: as late as 1913, the Russian Foreign Minister declared to the British Ambassador in Moscow that:

Whatever changes might take place it would never be in Russia's interest to embark on such a hazardous enterprise as an attack on India. She had to be on her guard on her western frontier both against Austria and Germany; she had to keep an eye on Turkey, and she had to safeguard her interests against China. Speaking entirely academically and unofficially, he thought that if Russia in twenty years' time adopted a forward policy it would not be in the direction of India but much further east.<sup>13</sup>



General Nikolai Grigorievich Stolietov (1834-1912)  
(Pamir Archive – Markus Hauser)

## Conclusion

As abundantly noted, both Empires exercised considerable restraint in their relations during the period 1828-1907, when their rivalry was at its height. In the end, “the claims of Afghanistan and Badakhshan ... reflected, in reality, the interests of Calcutta and Tashkent, tempered only by the expediency of getting their respective protégés reconciled to the bargain that would be struck.”<sup>14</sup> Both managed generally to keep their primary objectives clearly in view, although, on balance, the Russians were more consistent in their policies. That the

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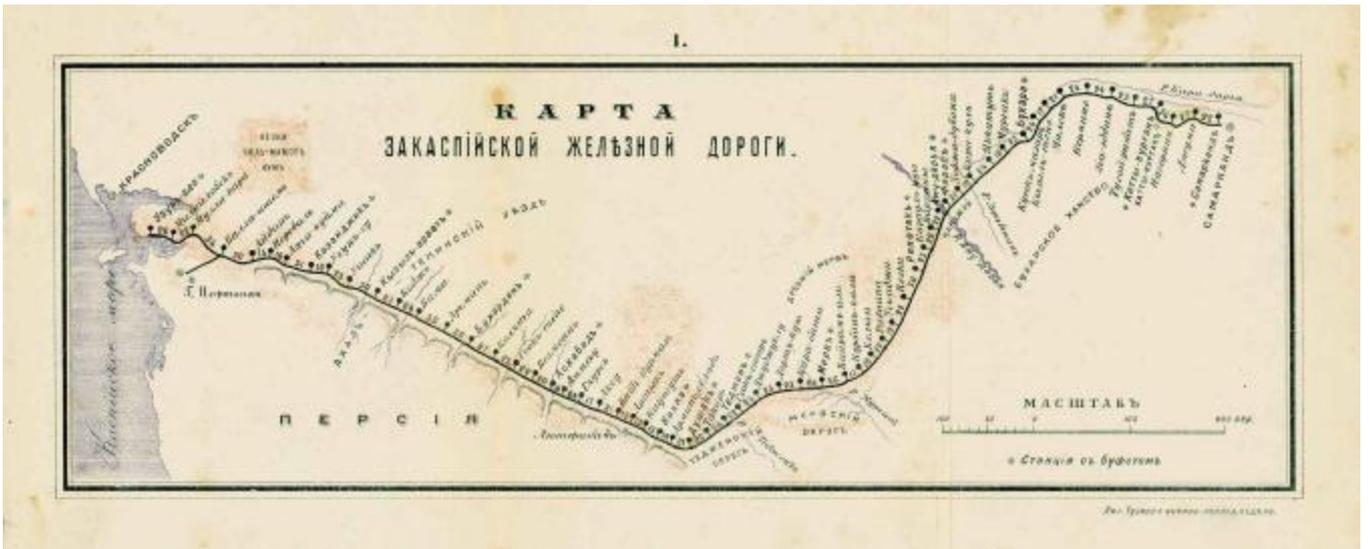
<sup>12</sup> See Jennifer Siegel, *Endgame - Britain, Russia and the Final Struggle for Central Asia*, I.B. Tauris, London 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Dispatch from Sir George Buchanan to Sir Edward Grey, 15 May 1913, quoted in Siegel, *op. cit.* p. 163.

<sup>14</sup> Chakravarty, *Afghanistan and the Great Game*, Delhi, 2002, pp. 69-70.

results of their joint negotiations, the Pamir frontiers, stand today is a tribute to the wise counsels that prevailed in their mutual relations.

If there was a 'game', it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the Russians played it rather better than their competitor. In logistics they were far ahead of the British: by 1898, the Russians had already completed a railway line from the Caspian to Tashkent and Andijan, with a southern branch to Ashgabad (at the rate of "a mile to a mile and a half a day")<sup>15</sup>, while the India Council was still arguing about an extension of the railway to the Afghan frontier; it was not until the British realised that Hunza and Chitral were threatened that they started planning improved communications with these distant regions.



Map of the Transcaspian Railway (Evarnitskij 1893)  
(Pamir Archive)

<sup>15</sup> Curzon, *Russia in Central Asia*, p. 45. Curzon also suggests that "the employment of the natives in the construction of the line, and the security they thereby enjoyed of fair and regular pay, has had a great deal to do with the rapid pacification of the country" (p. 50). The extension to Andijan was completed in 1899.



OPENING OF THE OXUS BRIDGE

Photograph by Lord Curzon of the opening of the railway bridge over the Oxus at Charjui (1888)

The Russians were more successful (and ruthless) in subduing the native population and better able to consolidate their territorial gains than the British with their hybrid system of alliances, financial inducements, threats, arms supply and shows of pageantry. Despite the ruthlessness with which the peoples of Central Asia were subdued by the Russians, even Rawlinson had to admit that

the extension of Russian arms to the east of the Caspian has been of immense benefit to the country. The substitution, indeed, of Russian rule for that of the Kirghiz, Uzbeks and Turkomans throughout a large portion of Central Asia has been an unmingled blessing to humanity. The execrable slave trade, with its concomitant horrors, has been abolished, brigandage has been suppressed, and Mahomedan fanaticism and cruelty have been generally mitigated and controlled. Commerce at the same time has been rendered more secure, local arts and manufactures have been encouraged, and the wants of the inhabitants have been everywhere more seriously regarded than is usual under Asiatic rulers.<sup>16</sup>

In 1892, W. Barnes Stevani, a correspondent for the London *Daily Chronicle* quoted approvingly the opinion of a German newspaper article:

It is not by might alone that Russia impresses the peoples of the East. Remembering the wise maxim of Skobelev, she takes care to 'smooth over, with love and attention, the sharp strokes of the sword' – a policy somewhat more effective than the wavering and partisan policy of the rulers of the British Empire.<sup>17</sup>

In the account of his ride across the Pamirs in 1900, Filchner made a similar comment:

In these regions, as well as in Chinese Turkestan, the Afghans show more respect for the Russians than the English. I attribute this to the deliberate and firm policy of Russia in Central Asia. ... And yet the Russians manage, in their dealings with Asiatic peoples, to reach out to their hearts, whereas the English, in their relations with natives, make a show of their cultural superiority. And it

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted by Curzon, *Russia in Central Asia*, p. 384.

<sup>17</sup> Article on Grombchevsky's travels in *The Asiatic Quarterly Review*, January-April 1892.

is this ability of the Russians to recognise even the wildest native as a fellow human being that gives them their strength in Asia ....<sup>18</sup>

Curzon too pointed out that

Russia unquestionably possess a remarkable gift for enlisting the allegiance and attracting even the friendship of those whom she has subdued by force of arms ... The Russian fraternises in the true sense of the word ... and he does not shrink from entering into social and domestic relations with alien or inferior races. ... A remarkable feature of the Russification of Central Asia is the employment given by the conqueror to her former opponents on the field of battle. ... I was a witness at Baku, where the four Khans of Merv were assembled in Russian uniform to greet the Czar.<sup>19</sup>

It is hard to imagine that a British general would have dreamt of calling on a local religious leader to pay his respects just after conquering his country, yet this is what Cherniaev did after taking Tashkent in 1865. Indeed, in many of the pronouncements by the British on relations with the Afghans, perceived insults to Britain and affronts to the dignity of her representatives are often mentioned as justification for military retribution. We may also note Curzon's slighting reference to 'inferior races' and similar remarks by others such as Francis Younghusband (see Chapter 6.2), suggesting that several of the British in India found it difficult to accept the native peoples as equals – a latent racism that must have made it hard for the British to gain the full confidence of the peoples with whom they came into contact.

The Russians' policy was opportunistic, pushing their advantage as far as it would go without actually becoming embroiled in major military confrontation and knowing just when to hold back. Accusations of bad faith have to be measured against the fact that Russia honoured her undertaking to return Dzungaria (in 1877) and Kuldja (in 1881) to the Chinese once the latter had shown that they were able to maintain order in these regions after the death of Yakub Khan.

Russia played the game of bluff with great skill, leaving the British continually guessing what her real intentions were. As Hopkirk suggests:

One cannot but be struck by the number of these [Russian] invasion plans which somehow reached British ears over the years. It could well have occurred to the Russian military that there was profit to be gained from such leaks, since they obliged the British to garrison more troops in India than would otherwise have been necessary. After all, it was not only the British who were playing the Bolshaya Igra, the Great Game.

Moreover, as Hopkirk concludes, "Russian officers serving on the frontier had long been given to such bellicose talk ... Its encouragement was one way of keeping up morale ..."<sup>20</sup>

Despite the courage and daring of the individuals involved, British military intelligence, as Hopkirk points out, "had been extremely haphazard, and compared badly with the well-organised and efficient Russian system ... Contrary to the impression given by Rudyard Kipling in *Kim*, there was no overall intelligence-gathering or co-ordinating body in India at that time."<sup>21</sup> Moreover, there was at least one extraordinary breach of security. Petrovsky, the Russian Consul-General in Kashgar from 1882 to 1902, expressed to one British visitor his astonishment at the "shortsightedness of the British Government in permitting the publication of MacGregor's book on the Russian advance towards India [*The Defence of India*, Simla, 1884], and asked me how it was that a staff officer had been permitted to make public the

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<sup>18</sup> Wilhelm Filchner, *Ein Ritt über den Pamir*, Berlin 1903, pp. 75-78

<sup>19</sup> *Russia in Central Asia*, pp. 388-389.

<sup>20</sup> Hopkirk, p. 285 and 501.

<sup>21</sup> Hopkirk, p. 422-3.

secret dispositions of the British forces in case of war. The book, he added, had been read by the Russian officials, and had created a great sensation.”<sup>22</sup>



Nikolai Fedorovich Petrovsky(1837-1908)  
([feb-web.ru/feb/rosarc/rac/rac-450-.htm](http://feb-web.ru/feb/rosarc/rac/rac-450-.htm))

After the Russians had consolidated their gains, they facilitated travel by distinguished British visitors, such as Curzon and Dunmore, whom they certainly knew to be spies but ostentatiously feted: they had everything to gain by exhibiting the extent of their control over the conquered territory. The British were not so imaginative – and were perhaps less confident of what they had to show.

The Marquis of Ripon, probably the wisest of the Viceroy's of the period, whose cool political judgement was the opposite of Lytton's rashness, expressed well the realities of territorial expansion in Central Asia in 1881:

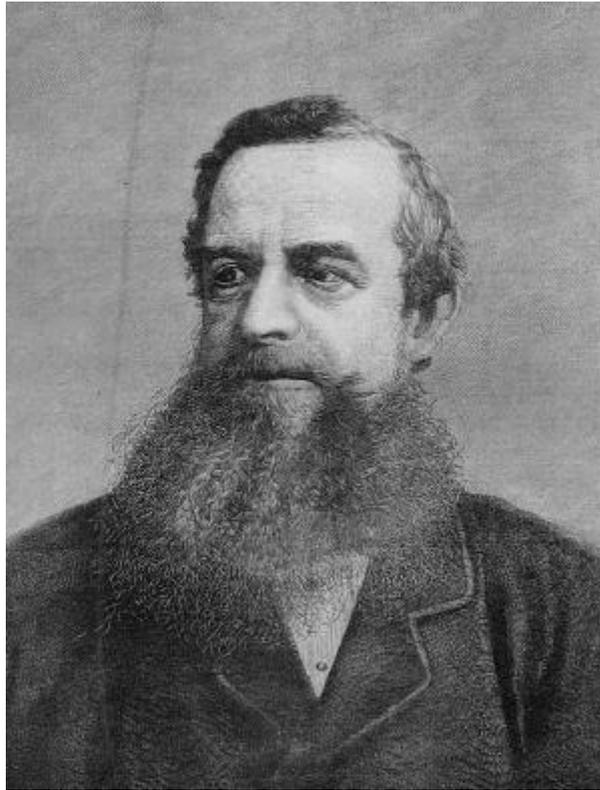
I have always thought that it was altogether unnecessary to seek for an explanation of Russia's advance in Central Asia in any far-reaching scheme of India conquest; the circumstances in which she has been placed seem to me quite sufficient to account for that advance without supposing her to be animated by any special hostility to England, or by any deep designs against our power in the East. I can scarcely conceive it possible that any Russian Government can seriously desire to acquire the possession of a vast territory like India lying at an enormous distance from their own country,<sup>23</sup> and I have the fullest confidence that England could successfully defend herself against any attack which Russia could make against her Indian dominions. But I hold that Russian interference in Afghanistan is to be deprecated in the interest of England and Russia alike.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ralph P. Cobbold, *Innermost Asia*, London 1900, pp. 66-67.

<sup>23</sup> The inconsistency of this conclusion, in the light of the similar distance between London and Delhi, seems to have escaped Ripon.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Singhal, *India and Afghanistan – A Study in Diplomatic Relations*, University of Queensland Press, 1963, p. 95.



George Robinson, 1st Marquess of Ripon (1827-1909)  
([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George\\_Robinson,\\_1st\\_Marquess\\_of\\_Ripon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Robinson,_1st_Marquess_of_Ripon))

The Russians had the advantage of an autocratic centralised administration and a clear military policy of subjugation. Officers, if not encouraged to take rash initiatives, were at least rewarded for success – and they achieved it. The British were handicapped by a lack of consistency in their strategy in Afghanistan and were constrained by public opinion from exercising the ruthlessness shown by Kaufmann in suppressing local dissension. Lord Salisbury, who served in or led several administrations during the period, was well aware of the limits of action in a Parliamentary democracy: “You would not venture to ask Parliament for two extra regiments on account of a movement in some unknown sandhills which is supposed to be a menace to Merv. That being the case, no despatches from this office ... would in the least degree disturb P. Gortchakoff or provoke a single telegraphic order to Turkistan.”<sup>25</sup> As Hopkirk points out, in commenting on Cherniaev’s disobedience that led to the capture of Tashkent by the Russians: “Such an action by a British general would have brought the wrath of Parliament and press down upon his head, not to mention that of the cabinet and his own superiors. In Russia there was only one man ultimately to please or displease – the Tsar himself.”<sup>26</sup>

Skobelev described his military policy as follows:

I hold it as a principle that in Asia the duration of peace is in direct proportion to the slaughter you inflict upon the enemy. The harder you hit them the longer they will be quiet afterwards. My system is this: To strike hard, and keep on hitting till resistance is completely over; then at once to form ranks, cease slaughter and be kind and humane to the prostrate enemy.<sup>27</sup>

Curzon commented approvingly:

A greater contrast than this can scarcely be imagined to the British method, which is to strike gingerly a series of taps, rather than a downright blow; rigidly to prohibit all pillage or slaughter,

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<sup>25</sup> Chakravarty, p. 221.

<sup>26</sup> Hopkirk, p.307.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted by Curzon, *Russia in Central Asia*, pp. 85-86.

and to abstain not less wholly from subsequent fraternisation. But there can be no doubt that the Russian tactics, however deficient they may be from the moral, are exceedingly effective from the practical point of view ...



Mikhail Dmitriyevich Skobelev (1843-1882)  
(Pamir Archive – Markus Hauser)

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The Russians were, indeed, fully occupied consolidating their territorial gains in Central Asia and it would have been folly for them to invade India. Their expansion into Central Asia was inevitable and foreseeable. Had there been less Russophobia among the British, it might have been possible to reach a final settlement with the Russians long before 1895 that would have given the British a completely free hand in northern India and Afghanistan. Salisbury had suggested in September 1878 that it might be more convenient simply to “seize the provinces which are financially and strategically the most desirable”<sup>28</sup> and Kaufmann never understood why the British had not simply taken over Afghanistan and applied tactics similar to his own to ensure their authority. In 1897, Petrovsky had expressed similar views to Ralph Cobbold.

The Tirah Expedition [against a Pathan uprising on the North-West Frontier in 1897] also afforded us much food for conversation. Petrovsky told me that he had taken in an English paper throughout the campaign in order to get full details, and adverted strongly on some of the action taken by the British Government in dealing with the Pathan. In his opinion the only satisfactory method to have adopted would have been to say to the general selected to command the expedition: “Take what troops you require, settle these troublesome people in the quickest manner possible. You have *carte blanche*, now go and do it.” Instead of which the officer in charge was hampered in every way by orders from London and from Simla emanating from people, the majority of whom had never been near the scene of operations, and who possessed no personal knowledge of the *status quo*. It was a first principle of the Russian administrative method to trust the general in command of an expedition implicitly. He would not be hampered in any way. If he succeeded, he would be rewarded; if he failed, his career would be closed. In the result a successful issue was assured from the outset; the desired end was attained in the shortest possible time. The loss of life

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<sup>28</sup> Chakravarty, p. 231.

involved was greatly lessened by the brevity of the campaign, and the cost would probably be one-half that involved by the British method.<sup>29</sup>

The British never defined a consistent policy towards Afghanistan. Curzon commented mercilessly:

We owe our record of Afghan failure and disaster, mingled indeed with some brilliant feats and redeemed by a few noble names, to the amazing political incompetence that has with fine continuity been brought to bear upon our relations with successive Afghan rulers. For fifty years there has not been an Afghan Amir whom we have not alternately fought against and caressed, now repudiating and now recognising his sovereignty, now appealing to his subjects as their saviours, now slaughtering them as our foes. It was so with Dost Mohammed, with Shir Ali, with Yakub, and it has been so with Abdurrahman Khan. Each one of these men has known the British both as enemies and as patrons, and has commonly only won the patronage by the demonstration of his power to command it. Small wonder that we have never been trusted by the Afghan rulers, or liked by the Afghan people! In the history of most conquering races is found some spot that has invariably exposed their weakness like the joints in armour of steel. Afghanistan has long been the Achilles' heel of Great Britain in the East. Impregnable elsewhere, she has shown herself uniformly vulnerable here.<sup>30</sup>

The legacy of this inconsistency was a weak and divided country, and the Afghans were never encouraged to develop strong native institutions or given the support or external stimulus that would have enabled them to do so. It is clear from the contemporary accounts of Wolff, Vambéry, and others – especially MacGahan – who travelled among them,<sup>31</sup> that the Turkomans and other tribes subdued by the Russians were just as fierce, belligerent and unruly as the Afghans and it is arguable, although perhaps politically incorrect, that, had Afghanistan been subdued in the same way by the British in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it might have emerged as a stronger state in the 20<sup>th</sup> and avoided the destiny with which we are today all too familiar in the 21<sup>st</sup>.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Cobbold, pp. 67-68.

<sup>30</sup> *Russia in Central Asia*, p. 356.

<sup>31</sup> See the splendid summary of their adventures in Fitzroy MacLean, *A Person from England and Other Travellers*, London 1958.

<sup>32</sup> A similar conclusion is suggested by Meyer and Brysac in *Tournament of Shadows* in relation to Tibet (e.g. pp. 423 and 447).