

The Great Game

The “Great Game” describes British and Russian rivalry for influence and control in Central Asia during the period from the mid 19th until the early 20th century.

Much has been written about this period, most notably by Peter Hopkirk in his classic *The Great Game*, first published in 1990 by John Murray, London. Hopkirk’s bibliography is accessible on <http://kutuphane.tbmm.gov.tr:8088/2001/200106086.pdf>. Surprisingly, and perhaps illegally, the full text of the revised 2006 edition can be accessed on <https://erenow.com/common/thegreatgamepeterhopkirk/1.html>.

I have updated my own chapter on the Great Game from the *Odyssey* book; it can be downloaded here. I disagree with some of the emphasis in Hopkirk’s book, notably in my conclusions in the following extracts:

1. “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. 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.” (page 5)

2. “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 19th 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.” (page 7)

3. “Few political leaders in Britain (and certainly not all in India) really believed that Russia would be foolish enough to attempt an invasion of India, or that, if she did, she stood any chance of success. This judgement was based, in addition to political assessments, at least in part on the major logistical problems of such an invasion.” (page 13)

4. “The outcome of the incidents described shows that, despite public protest and the clamour of many of the players of the ‘Great Game’, cooler heads in both Britain and Russia were at pains to avoid war and to settle their differences by agreement. Both governments appreciated the contribution made by the other to the pacification of their respective frontier regions and recognised what they considered to be the “civilising” influence each brought to bear in regions inhabited mainly by nomads and ‘unruly tribes’. Towards the end of the century, both were

concerned by the rise of Germany and foresaw a need to settle their differences with a view to a future alliance.” (page 32)

5. “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.” (Chakravarty, pp. 69-70.) Both managed generally to keep their primary objectives clearly in view, although, on balance, the Russians were more consistent in their policies. That the results of their joint negotiations, the Pamir frontiers, stand today is a tribute to the wise counsels that prevailed in their mutual relations.” (page 35)

6. “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 from a mile to a mile and a half in a day”), 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.

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.” (pages 35-36)

[See also the section “Historical Photos” here.]

Another classic work is A.V. Postnikov’s book Схватка на «Крыше Мире» – Политики, разведчики и географы в бо рьбе за Памир в XIX веке; (Struggle on the “Roof of the World”: Politicians, spies and geographers in the contest for the Pamir in the XIX century), Moscow 2005, ISBN 5-7905-3465-1.

An interesting list of related documentary resources on the Great Game available from IDC Publishers in the Netherlands can be found here.

Dr. Postnikov’s comprehensive bibliography is divided into two parts:

- a) Russian language publications and
- b) other languages (principally English, but some French, German and Polish).

The latter is given below with the kind permission of the author N.B. I have added a few relevant and more recent publications.

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