

The Great Game – 1826 - 1947



In 1826, Russia attacked Persia and became the dominant influence in that country. Ottoman Turkey could only look on aghast. Fear grew in London and Calcutta that the North-West Frontier of the Empire was threatened by Czarist Russia. The Russians were indeed making inroads into Central Asia. While some Russian generals may have dreamt of conquering India they were still 2000 miles away beyond two major local kingdoms – the Punjab and Afghanistan.

Informed opinion held that any Russian invasion would be best met on the plains rather than the difficult and broken country of the Hindu Kush or in Central Asia where supply would be impossible

The Russians began to talk openly of the coming war with Britain where the belief was that the Russians would use Afghanistan as a launching point for an invasion of British held India and would therefore seek to establish influence in the country prior to the stationing of troops for an expedition.

In 1834, after a period of peace and stability, a new ruler succeeded to the peacock throne of Persia, and encouraged by his Russian advisers his ambition knew no bounds. He moved into the border area of Herat, ethnically Farsi, causing major panic in London.

This was the beginning of ‘The Great Game’, and the result was that in the Spring of 1839 the British invaded Afghanistan for the first time. Led by lancers in scarlet cloaks and plumed shakos, nearly 20,000 British and East India company troops poured into the passes and re-established on the throne Shah Shuja ul-Mulk. On the way in, the British faced little resistance; but after two years of occupation, the Afghan people rose in answer to the call for jihad and the country exploded into violent rebellion. The first Anglo-Afghan war ended in Britain’s greatest military humiliation of the nineteenth century. An entire army of what was then the most powerful nation in the world ambushed in retreat through high mountain snow drifts and was utterly routed by Afghan tribesmen.

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