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The Afghan War

by Engels

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Afghanistan, an extensive country of Asia, north-west of India. It lies between Persia and the Indies, and in the other direction between the Hindu Kush and the Indian Ocean. It formerly included the Persian provinces of Khorassan and Kohistan, together with Herat, Beluchistan, Cashmere, and Sinde, and a considerable part of the Punjab. In its present limits there are probably not more than 4,000,000 inhabitants. The surface of Afghanistan is very irregular, – lofty table lands, vast mountains, deep valleys, and ravines. Like all mountainous tropical countries it presents every variety of climate. In the Hindu Kush, the snow lies all the year on the lofty summits, while in the valleys the thermometer ranges up to 130°. The heat is greater in the eastern than in the western parts, but the climate is generally cooler than that of India; and although the alternations of temperature
between summer and winter, or day and night, are very great, the country is generally healthy. The principal diseases are fevers, catarrhs, and ophthalmia. Occasionally the small-pox is destructive. The soil is of exuberant fertility. Date palms flourish in the oases of the sandy wastes; the sugar cane and cotton in the warm valleys; and European fruits and vegetables grow luxuriantly on the hill-side terraces up to a level of 6,000 or 7,000 feet. The mountains are clothed with noble forests, which are frequented by bears, wolves, and foxes, while the lion, the leopard, and the tiger, are found in districts congenial to their habits. The animals useful to mankind are not wanting. There is a fine variety of sheep of the Persian or large-tailed breed. The horses are of good size and blood. The camel and ass are used as beasts of burden, and goats, dogs, and cats, are to be found in great numbers. Beside the Hindu Kush, which is a continuation of the Himalayas, there is a mountain chain called the Solyman mountain, on the south-west; and between Afghanistan and Balkh, there is a chain known as the Paropamisan

range, very little information concerning which has, however, reached Europe. The rivers are few in number; the Helmund and the Kabul are the most important. These take their rise in the Hindu Kush, the Kabul flowing cast and falling into the Indus near Attock; the Helmund flowing west through the district of Seiestan and falling into the lake of Zurrah. The Helmund has the peculiarity of overflowing its banks annually like the Nile, bringing fertility to the soil, which, beyond the limit of the inundation, is sandy desert. The principal cities of Afghanistan are Kabul, the capital, Ghuznee, Peshawer, and Kandahar. Kabul is a fine town, lat. 34° 10' N. long. 60° 43' E., on the river of the same name. The buildings are of wood, neat and commodious, and the town being surrounded with fine gardens, has a very pleasing aspect. It is environed with villages, and is in the midst of a large plain encircled with low hills. The tomb of the emperor Baber is its chief monument. Peshawer is a large city, with a population estimated at 100,000. Ghuznee, a city of ancient renown, once the capital of the great sultan Mahmoud, has fallen from its great estate and is now a poor place. Near it is Mahmoud's tomb. Kandahar was founded as recently as 1754. It is on the site of an ancient city. It was for a few years the capital; but in 1774 the seat of government was removed to Kabul. It is believed to contain 100,000 inhabitants. Near the city is the tomb of Shah Ahmed, the founder of the city, an asylum so sacred that even the king may not remove a criminal who has taken refuge within its walls.

The geographical position of Afghanistan, and the peculiar character of the people, invest the country with a political importance that can scarcely be over-estimated in the affairs of Central Asia. The government is a monarchy, but the king's authority over his high-spirited and turbulent subjects, is personal and very uncertain. The kingdom is divided into provinces, each superintended by a representative of the sovereign, who collects the revenue and remits it to the capital.

The Afghans are a brave, hardy, and independent race; they follow pastoral or agricultural occupations only, eschewing trade and commerce, which they contemptuously resign to Hindus, and to other inhabitants of towns. With them, war is an excitement and relief from the monotonous occupation of industrial pursuits.

The Afghans are divided into clans[41], over which the various chiefs exercise a sort of feudal supremacy. Their indomitable hatred of rule, and their love of individual independence, alone prevents their becoming a powerful nation; but this very irregularity and uncertainty of action makes them dangerous neighbours, liable to be blown about by the wind of caprice, or to be stirred up by political intriguers, who artfully excite their passions. The two principal tribes are the Dooranees and Ghilgies, who are always at feud with each other. The Dooranee is the more powerful; and in virtue of their supremacy their ameer or khan made himself king of Afghanistan. He has a revenue of about £10,000,000. His authority is supreme only in his tribe. The military contingents are chiefly furnished by the Dooranees; the rest of the army is supplied either by the other clans, or by military adventurers who enlist into the service in hopes of pay or plunder. Justice in the towns is administered by cadis, but the Afghans rarely resort to law. Their khans have the right of punishment even to the extent of life or death. Avenging of blood is a family duty; nevertheless, they are said to be a liberal and generous people when unprovoked, and the rights of hospitality are so sacred that a deadly enemy who eats bread and salt, obtained even by stratagem, is sacred from revenge, and may even claim the protection of his host against

all other danger. In religion they are Mohammedans, and of the Soonee sect; but they are not bigoted, and alliances between Sheeahs and Soonees[42] are by no means uncommon.

Afghanistan has been subjected alternately to Mogul[43] and Persian dominion. Previous to the advent of the British on the shores of India the foreign invasions which swept the plains of Hindostan alwaysproceeded from Afghanistan. Sultan Mahmoud the Great, Genghis Khan, Tameriane, and Nadir Shah, all took this road. In 1747 after the death of Nadir, Shah Ahmed, who had learned the art of war under that military adventurer, determined to shake off the Persian yoke. Under him Afghanistan reached its highest point of greatness and prosperity in modern times. He belonged to the family of the Suddosis, and his first act was to seize upon the booty which his late chief had gathered in India. In 1748 he succeeded in expelling the Mogul governor from Kabul and Peshawer, and crossing the Indus he rapidly overran the Punjab. His kingdom extended from Khorassan to Delhi, and he even measured swords with the Mahratta powers.[44]

These great enterprises did not, however, prevent him from cultivating some of the arts of peace, and he was favourably known as a poet and historian. He died in 1772, and left his crown to his son Timour, who, however, was unequal to the weighty charge. He abandoned the city of Kandahar, which had been founded by his father, and had, in a few years, become a wealthy and populous town, and removed the seat of government back to Kabul. During his reign the internal dissensions of the tribes, which had been repressed by the firm hand of Shah Ahmed, were revived. In 1793 Timour died, and Siman succeeded him. This prince conceived the idea of consolidating the Mohammedan power of India, and this plan, which might have seriously endangered the British possessions, was thought so important that Sir John Malcolm was sent to the frontier to keep the Afghans in check, in case of their making any movement, and at the same time negotiations were opened with Persia, by whose assistance the Afghans might be placed between two fires.

These precautions were, however, unnecessary; Siman Shah was more than sufficiently occupied by conspiracies, and disturbances at home, and his great plans were nipped in the bud. The king's brother, Mahmud, threw himself into Herat with the design of erecting an independent principality, but failing in his attempt he fled into Persia. Siman Shah had been assisted in attaining the throne by the Bairukshee family, at the head of which was Sheir Afras Khan. Siman's appointment of an unpopular vizier excited the hatred of his old supporters, who organized a conspiracy which was discovered, and Sheir Afras was put to death. Mahmud was now recalled by the conspirators, Siman was taken prisoner and his eyes put out. In opposition to Mahmud, who was supported by the Dooranees, Shah Soojah was put forward by the Ghilgies, and held the throne for some time; but he was at last defeated, chiefly through the treachery of his own supporters, and was forced to take refuge amongst the Sikhs. [45]

In 1809 Napoleon had sent Gen. Gardane to Persia in the hope of inducing the shah [Fath Ali] to invade India, and the Indian government sent a representative [Mountstuart Elphinstone] to the court of Shah Soojah to create an opposition to Persia. At this epoch, Runjeet Singh rose into power and fame. He was a Sikh chieftain, and by his genius made his country independent of the Afghans, and erected a kingdom in the Punjab, earning for himself the title of Maharajah (chief rajah), and the respect of the Anglo-Indian government. The usurper Mahmud was, however, not

destined to enjoy his triumph long. Futteh Khan, his vizier, who had alternately fluctuated between Mahmud and Shah Soojah, as ambition or temporary interest prompted, was seized by the king's son Kamran, his eyes put out, and afterward cruelly put to death. The powerful family of the murdered vizier swore to avenge his death. The puppet Shah Soojah was again brought forward and Mahmud expelled. Shah Soojah having given offence, however, was presently deposed, and another brother crowned in his stead. Mahmud fled to Herat, of which he continued in possession, and in 1829 on his death his son Kamran succeeded him in the government of that district.

The Bairukshee family, having now attained chief power, divided the territory among themselves, but following the national usage quarrelled, and were only united in presence of a common enemy. One of the brothers, Mohammed Khan, held the city of Peshawer, for which he paid tribute to Runjeet Singh; another held Ghuznee; a third Kandahar; while in Kabul, Dost Mohammed, the most powerful of the family, held sway.

To this prince, Capt. Alexander Burnes was sent as ambassador in 1835, when Russia and England were intriguing against each other in Persia and Central Asia. He offered an alliance which the Dost was but too eager to accept; but the Anglo-Indian government demanded every thing from him, while it offered absolutely nothing in return. In the mean time, in 1838, the Persians, with Russian aid and advice, laid siege to Herat, the key of Afghanistan and India[46]; a Persian and a Russian agent arrived at Kabul, and the Dost, by the constant refusal of any positive engagement on the part of the British, was, at last, actually compelled to receive overtures from the other parties. Burnes left, and Lord Auckland, then governor-general of India, influenced by his secretary W. McNaghten, determined to punish Dost Mohammed, for what he himself had compelled him to do. He resolved to dethrone him, and to set up Shah Soojah, now a pensioner of the Indian government. A treaty was concluded with Shah Soojah, and with the Sikhs; the shah began collecting an army, paid and officered by the British, and an Anglo-Indian force was concentrated on the Sutlej. McNaghten, seconded by Burnes, was to accompany the expedition in the quality of envoy in Afghanistan. In the mean time the Persians had raised the siege of Herat, and thus the only valid reason for interference in Afghanistan was removed, but, nevertheless, in December 1838, the army marched toward Sinde, which country was coerced into submission, and the payment of a contribution for the benefit of the Sikhs and Shah Soojah.[47] Feb. 20, 1839, the British army passed the Indus. It consisted of about 12,000 men, with above 40,000 camp-followers, beside the new levies of the shah. The Bolan Pass was traversed in March; want of provisions and forage began to be felt; the camels dropped by hundreds, and a great part of the baggage was lost. April 7, the army entered the Khojak Pass, traversed it without resistance, and on April 25 entered Kandahar, which the Afghan princes, brothers of Dost Mohammed, had abandoned. After a rest of two months, Sir John Keane, the commander, advanced with the main body of the army toward the north, leaving a brigade, under Nott, in Kandahar. Ghuznee, the impregnable stronghold of Afghanistan, was taken, July 22, a deserter having brought information that the Kabul gate was the only one which had not been walled up; it was accordingly blown down, and the place was then stormed. After this disaster, the army which Dost Mohammed had collected, at once disbanded, and Kabul too opened its gates, Aug. 6. Shah Soojah was installed in due form, but the real direction of government remained in the hands of McNaghten, who also paid all Shah Soojah's expenses out of the Indian treasury.

The conquest of Afghanistan seemed accomplished, and a considerable portion of the troops was sent back. But the Afghans were noways content to be ruled by the Feringhee Kaffirs (European infidels), and during the whole of 1840 and '41, insurrection followed on insurrection in every part of the country. The Anglo-Indian troops had to be constantly on the move. Yet, McNaghten declared this to be the normal state of Afghan society, and wrote home that every thing went on well, and Shah Soojah's power was taking root. In vain were the warnings of the military officers and the other political agents. Dost Mohammed had surrendered to the British in October, 1840, and was sent to India; every insurrection during the summer of '41 was successfully repressed, and toward October, McNaghten, nominated governor of Bombay, intended leaving with another body of troops for India. But then the storm broke out. The occupation of Afghanistan cost the Indian treasury £1,250,000 per annum: 16,000 troops, Anglo-Indian, and Shah Soojah's, had to be paid in Afghanistan; 3,000 more lay in Sinde, and the Bolan Pass; Shah Soojah's regal splendours, the salaries of his functionaries, and all expenses of his court and government, were paid by the Indian treasury, and finally, the Afghan chiefs were subsidized, or rather bribed, from the same source, in order to keep them out of mischief.

McNaghten was informed of the impossibility of going on at this rate of spending money. He attempted retrenchment, but the only possible way to enforce it was to cut down the allowances of the chiefs. The very day he attempted this, the chiefs formed a conspiracy for the extermination of the British, and thus McNaghten himself was the means of bringing about the concentration of those insurrectionary forces, which hitherto had struggled against the invaders singly, and without unity or concert; though it is certain, too, that by this time the hatred of British dominion among the Afghans had reached the highest point.

The English in Kabul were commanded by Gen. Elphinstone, a gouty, irresolute, completely helpless old man, whose orders constantly contradicted each other. The troops occupied a sort of fortified camp, which was so extensive that the garrison was scarcely sufficient to man the ramparts, much less to detach bodies to act in the field. The works were so imperfect that ditch and parapet could be ridden over on horseback. As if this was not enough, the camp was commanded almost within musket range by the neighbouring heights, and to crown the absurdity of the arrangements, all provisions, and medical stores, were in two detached forts at some distance from camp, separated from it, moreover, by walled gardens and another small fort not occupied by the English. The citadel or Bala Hissar of Kabul would have offered strong and splendid winter quarters for the whole army, but to please Shah Soojah, it was not occupied. Nov. 2, 1841, the insurrection broke out. The house of Alexander Burnes, in the city, was attacked and he himself murdered. The British general did nothing, and the insurrection grew strong by impunity. Elphinstone, utterly helpless, at the mercy of all sorts of contradictory advice, very soon got every thing into that confusion which Napoleon [Bonaparte] described by the three words, ordre, contre-ordre, disordre . The Bala Hissar was, even now, not occupied. A few companies were sent against the thousands of insurgents, and of course were beaten. This still more emboldened the Afghans. Nov. 3, the forts close to the camp were occupied. On the 9th, the commissariat fort (garrisoned by only 80 men) was taken by the Afghans, and the British were thus reduced to starvation. On the 5th, Elphinstone already talked of buying a free passage out of the country. In fact, by the middle of November, his irresolution and incapacity had so demoralised the troops that neither Europeans nor Sepoys[48] were any longer fit to meet the

Afghans in the open field. Then the negotiations began. During these, McNaghten was murdered in a conference with Afghan chiefs. Snow began to cover the ground, provisions were scarce. At last, Jan. 1, a capitulation was concluded. All the money, £190,000, was to be handed over to the Afghans, and bills signed for £140,000 more. All the artillery and ammunition, except 6 six-pounders and 3 mountain guns, were to remain. All Afghanistan was to be evacuated. The chiefs, on the other hand, promised a safe conduct, provisions, and baggage cattle.

Jan. 5, the British marched out, 4,500 combatants and 12,000 camp-followers. One march sufficed to dissolve the last remnant of order, and to mix up soldiers and camp-followers in one hopeless confusion, rendering all resistance impossible. The cold and snow and the want of provisions acted as in Napoleon's retreat from Moscow [in 1812]. But instead of Cossacks keeping a respectful distance, the British were harassed by infuriated Afghan marksmen, armed with long-range matchlocks, occupying every height. The chiefs who signed the capitulation neither could nor would restrain the mountain tribes. The Koord-Kabul Pass became the grave of nearly all the army, and the small remnant, less than 200 Europeans, fell at the entrance of the Jugduluk Pass. Only one man, Dr. Brydon, reached Jelalabad to tell the tale. Many officers, however, had been seized by the Afghans, and kept in captivity, Jelalabad was held by Sale's brigade. Capitulation was demanded of him, but he refused to evacuate the town, so did Nott at Kandahar. Ghuznee had fallen; there was not a single man in the place that understood any thing about artillery, and the Sepoys of the garrison had succumbed to the climate.

In the mean time, the British authorities on the frontier at the first news of the disaster of Kabul, had concentrated at Peshawer the troops destined for the relief of the regiments in Afghanistan. But transportation was wanting and the Sepoys fell sick in great numbers. Gen. Pollock, in February, took the command, and by the end of March, 1842, received further reinforcements. He then forced the Khyber Pass, and advanced to the relief of Sale at Jelalabad; here Sale had a few days before completely defeated the investing Afghan army. Lord Ellenborough, now governor-general of India, ordered the troops to fall back; but both Nott and Pollock found a welcome excuse in the want of transportation. At last, by the beginning of July, public opinion in India forced Lord Ellenborough to do something for the recovery of the national honour and the prestige of the British army; accordingly, he authorised an advance on Kabul, both from Kandahar and Jelalabad. By the middle of August, Pollock and Nott had come to an understanding respecting their movements, and Aug. 20, Pollock moved towards Kabul, reached Gundamuck, and beat a body of Afghans on the 23rd, carried the Jugduluk Pass Sept. 8, defeated the assembled strength of the enemy on the 13th at Tezeen, and encamped on the 15th under the walls of Kabul. Nott, in the mean time, had, Aug. 7, evacuated Kandahar, and marched with all his forces toward Ghuznee. After some minor engagements, he defeated a large body of Afghans, Aug. 30, took possession of Ghuznee, which had been abandoned by the enemy, Sept. 6, destroyed the works and town, again defeated the Afghans in the strong position of Alydan, and, Sept. 17, arrived near Kabul, where Pollock at once established his communication with him. Shah Soojah had, long before, been murdered by some of the chiefs, and since then no regular government had existed in Afghanistan; nominally, Futteh Jung, his son, was king. Pollock despatched a body of cavalry after the Kabul prisoners, but these had succeeded in bribing their guard, and met him on the road. As a mark of vengeance, the bazaar of Kabul was destroyed, on which occasion the soldiers plundered part of the town and massacred many inhabitants. Oct. 12, the British left Kabul and marched by Jelalabad and Peshawer to India.

Futteh Jung, despairing of his position, followed them. Dost Mohammed was now dismissed from captivity, and returned to his kingdom. Thus ended the attempt of the British to set up a prince of their own making in Afghanistan.

Footnotes

40. That Engels wanted to write an article on Afghanistan (with emphasis on the Anglo-Afghan war of 1838-42) is evident from the fact that he included this topic in the provisional list of articles for The New American Cyclopaedia in his letter to Marx of May 28, 1857. On July 11, 1857, however, Engels informed Marx that the article would not be ready by July 14, as agreed. The work on it apparently took longer than expected. Marx had received it by August 11 and, as can be seen from the entry in his notebook for this date, sent it off to New York, In a letter to Marx of September 2, 1857 Charles Dana acknowledged receipt of "Invasion of Afghanistan". When working on this article Engels used J. W. Kaye's History of the War in Afghanistan Vols. I-II, London, 1851 (see this volume, pp. 379-90).

41. Engels uses the term "clan", widespread in Western Europe, to designate heli (tribal groups) into which Afghan tribes were divided.

42. Soonees (Sunnites) and Sheeahs (Shiites) – members of the two main Mohammedan sects which appeared in the seventh century as the result of conflicts between the successors of Mohammed, founder of Islam.

43. The Moguls – invaders of Turkish descent, who came to India from the cast of Central Asia in the early sixteenth century and in 1526 founded the Empire of the Great Moguls (named after the ruling dynasty of the Empire) in Northern India. Contemporaries regarded them as the direct descendants of the Mongol warriors of Genghis Khan, hence the name "Moguls". In the mid-seventeenth century the Mogul Empire included most of India and part of Afghanistan. Later on, however, the Empire began to decline due to peasant rebellions, the growing resistance of the Indian people to the Mohammedan conquerors, and increasing separatist tendencies. In the early half of the eighteenth century the Empire of the Great Moguls virtually ceased to exist.

44. The Mahrattas (Marathas) – an ethnic group who lived in Northwestern Deccan. In the mid-seventeenth century they began an armed struggle against the Empire of the Great Moguls, thus contributing to its decline. In the course of the struggle the Mahrattas formed an independent state of their own, whose rulers soon embarked on wars of conquest. At the close of the seventeenth century their state was weakened by internal feudal strife, but early in the eighteenth century a powerful confederation of Mahratta principalities was formed under a supreme governor, the Peshwa. In 1761 they suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of the Afghans in the struggle for supremacy in India. Weakened by this struggle and internal feudal strife, the Mabratta principalities fell a prey to the East India Company and were subjugated by it as a result of the Anglo-Mahratta war of 1803-05.

45. The Sikhs – a religious sect which appeared in the Punjab (Northwestern India) in the sixteenth century. Their belief in equality became the ideology of the peasants and lower urban strata in their struggle against the Empire of the Great Moguls and the Afghan invaders at the end of the seventeenth century. Subsequently a local aristocracy emerged among the Sikhs and

its representatives headed the Sikh principalities. In the early nineteenth century these principalities united under Ranjit Singh whose Sikh state included the Punjab and some neighbouring regions. The British authorities in India provoked an armed conflict with the Sikhs in 1845 and in 1846 succeeded in turning the Sikh state into a vassal. The Sikhs revolted in 1848, but were subjugated in 1849.

46. The siege of Herat by the Persians lasted from November 1837 to August 1838. Intent on increasing Britain's influence in Afghanistan and weakening Russia's in Persia, the British Government declared the Shah's actions to be hostile to Britain and demanded that he should lift the siege. Threatening him with war, it sent a squadron into the Persian Gulf in 1838. The Shah was forced to submit and to agree to a one-sided trade treaty with Britain. Marx described the siege of Heart in his article "The War against Persia."

47. During the Anglo-Afghan war the East India Company resorted to threats and violence to obtain the consent of the feudal rulers of Sind, a region in the northwest of India (now in Pakistan) bordering on Afghanistan, to the passage of British troops across their territory. Taking advantage of this, the British demanded in 1843 that the local feudal princes proclaim themselves vassals of the Company. After crushing the rebel Baluchi tribes (natives of Sind), they declared the annexation of the entire region to British India.

48. Sepoys – mercenary troops in the British-Indian army recruited from the Indian population and serving under British officers. They were used by the British to subjugate India and to fight the wars of conquest against Afghanistan, Burma and other neighbouring states. However, the Sepoys shared the general discontent of the Indian people with the colonial regime and took part in the national liberation insurrection in India in 1857-59.