



ANGLO-RUSSIAN CONVENTION OF 1907

ANGLO-RUSSIAN CONVENTION OF 1907, an agreement relating to Persia, Afghanistan, and Tibet. Signed on 31 August in St. Petersburg, it formalized political changes that had occurred in the Far East, the Middle East and Europe as a result of the Russo-Japanese war and the Russian revolution of 1905. Anglo-Russian rivalry in Iran originated when Emperor Alexander I annexed Georgia and other territories that had been for centuries under Persian sovereignty. The fear of a Franco-Russian drive against India had initially impelled the British to oppose the extension of Russian influence, but even the downfall of Napoleon did not make the British feel secure in their possession of India.

At the end of the 19th century, Russia's position vis-à-vis Britain was growing progressively stronger. Having conquered most of Central Asia, the Russians extended their influence to Manchuria and Korea, posing a threat to Japan and to British interests in China. The Anglo-Japanese Treaty of 1902 was England's attempt to raise an obstacle to further Russian advances in Asia by permitting the Japanese to wage a victorious war against the Russians. Japan's success and the subsequent revolutionary outbreaks in much of the Russian empire persuaded the British that Russia was not as formidable a threat as they had imagined. At the same time a number of British politicians had developed a deep fear of Germany. The statesmen responsible for the formulation of British foreign policies sought an understanding with Russia that would



complement the Anglo-French entente and complete the diplomatic isolation of Germany.

Early British attempts to induce the Russians to sign an agreement on Persia and Afghanistan, the two most sensitive areas of rivalry, ended in failure. Sensing that time was on their side, the Russians had no intention of bargaining away any part of Persia or Afghanistan; but military defeat and revolution compelled the Russian government to reappraise the goals and methods of its foreign policy. The initiative in the negotiations belonged to the new British ambassador at St. Petersburg, Sir Arthur Nicolson, who, together with Sir Edward Grey and Sir Charles Hardinge, permanent under-secretary at the Foreign Office, constituted the hard core of the anti-German group that sought a Russian alliance. Nicolson's proposals were discussed in detail by the Russian cabinet. In the light of recent events, Izvol'skiĭ, the minister of foreign affairs, argued against the old conviction that Persia must fall entirely under Russian influence and in favor of removing the grounds of conflict with England, the most suitable means for which was the delimitation of spheres of influence ("Toward the History of the 1907 Anglo-Russian Agreement," *Krasnyi Arkhiv* 2-3 [69-70], 1935, p. 19, in Russian).

The outbreak of the Constitutional Revolution in Tehran threatened to frustrate the negotiations that were taking place in St. Petersburg. Persian revolutionaries were pro-British and anti-Russian; some 10,000 opponents of despotism took *bast* (sanctuary) in the British Legation in expectation of British support for the revolutionary cause. The Persian government had begun to suspect a rapprochement between Britain and Russia as early as November, 1905. However, the Persian minister in London, Moḥammad-'Alī Khan 'Alā'-al-saltāna, was assured by Lord Lansdowne, then Britain's foreign minister, "that the report was without foundation. The Persian government might rest assured that we had no intention of in any way encroaching upon the integrity and independence of Persia" (Great Britain, Public Records Office, The Foreign Office Archives, Series F.O. 60/697). At no time during more than a year of negotiations did the British or the Russians inform Persia, Afghanistan, or Tibet of the decisions being made about them or at their expense.

The agreement on Tibet in the 1907 convention paid lip service to Chinese sovereignty. Both parties promised not to deal with the Tibetans except through the Chinese, yet the British were to have the right to deal with Tibetan authorities on commercial matters, while Russian Buddhists were to have the right to deal with the Dalai Lama on religious matters. The agreement on



Afghanistan, where the two powers had a longer history of rivalry and conflict, was more complex; in essence it was a victory for Britain. The British government declared that it had no intention of changing the political status of Afghanistan and that it would exercise its “influence in Afghanistan only in a pacific sense,” and would neither “take, nor encourage Afghanistan to take, any measures threatening Russia.” The Russian government declared in return that it recognized “Afghanistan as outside the sphere of Russian influence,” and engaged to conduct all its relations with Afghanistan “through the intermediary of His Britannic Majesty’s Government.” Furthermore, Russia would not send agents into Afghanistan (text of the convention in J. C. Hurewitz, ed., *The Middle East and North Africa in World Politics*, New Haven, 1975, I, pp. 538-41). The British promised not to annex any Afghan territory “or to interfere in the internal administration of the country, provided that the Ameer fulfills the engagements already contracted by him towards His Britannic Majesty’s Government” The contracting parties would adhere to the principle of equality of commercial opportunity while the agreement would become effective after the amir consented to its terms.

The heart of the convention was its first section, concerning Persia. The preamble stated that the contracting parties “mutually engaged to respect the integrity and independence of Persia” and that they sincerely desired the preservation of order throughout the country. In article one Great Britain engaged not to seek for herself, for her subjects or for subjects of third powers, “any Concessions of a political or commercial nature—such as Concession for railways, banks, telegraphs, roads, transport, insurance, etc.,—beyond a line starting from Kasr-i-Shirin, passing through Isfahan, Yezd, Kakhk, and ending at a point on the Persian frontier at the intersection of the Russian and Afghan frontiers” Within this area, Britain would not oppose “directly or indirectly, demands for similar Concessions. . . which are supported by the Russian Government.” In article two Russia engaged “not to seek for herself and not to support, in favour of Russian subjects, or in favour of subjects of third Powers” similar concessions in the area “beyond a line going from the Afghan frontier by way of Gazik, Birjand, Kerman, and ending at Bunder Abbas, and not to oppose, directly or indirectly, demands for similar Concessions in this region which are supported by the British Government.” Thus articles one and two created the Russian and British spheres of interests in Persia, though the text of the convention never names them such. Article three established that Britain and Russia were free to acquire concessions within their spheres of influence without opposition from the other



contracting party and confirmed all existing concessions in those areas. Article four dealt with the difficult problem of Persian debts. Over the preceding four decades the shahs had borrowed large sums for unproductive purposes, and, given the state of the economy and the tax system, there was no hope of repayment without the introduction of radical changes that were beyond the understanding or the capacity of Qajar rulers. The two contracting parties agreed on the division of revenues from Persian customs, fisheries, posts, and telegraphs for the amortization of Persian debts to the Russian-controlled Loan and Discount Bank of Persia (Bānk-e Esteqrāzī-e Rūs) and the British-controlled Imperial Bank of Persia (Bānk-e Šāhanšāhī-e Īrān). Article five stipulated that if Persia did not keep up payments to the two banks, Russia and Britain would enter “into a friendly exchange of ideas” before either would “establish control over the sources of revenue.”

The convention aroused great bitterness among the Iranians and the Afghans. It remained in force, with revisions made in 1915, until it was repudiated by the Soviet government in 1918, although both its letter and its spirit were repeatedly violated by Russia almost from the moment it was signed. Only fear of Germany and the consequent firm determination to maintain good relations with Russia can explain Britain’s passivity in the face of such Russian acts as the invasions of Persia, the occupation of its northern provinces, and even collection of taxes in certain of its areas.

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