



HERAT VII. THE HERAT FRONTIER IN THE LATTER HALF OF 19TH AND 20TH CENTURIES

HERAT

vii. THE HERAT FRONTIER IN THE LATTER HALF OF 19TH AND 20TH CENTURIES

In the latter half of the 19th century, following the settlement of the Khorasan frontier with Persia in 1857, the rulers of Kabul, with British support, sought to make Herat a part of the Afghan state and to defend it from Russian military advances. In the spring of 1863, Dōst-Moḥammad Khan (r. 1826-38 and 1842-63) surrounded and took the city, allowing his four thousand soldiers to plunder it as compensation (Fayẓ Moḥammad Kāteb, pp. 77-78; Vambery, p. 202; Noelle, pp. 264-65). Thus, Herat fell into the possession of the Afghans, although its inhabitants were mainly Shi'ite and though Nāṣer-al-Din Shah's name could still be heard in the city's mosques during the Friday prayer for the ruler (Vambery, pp. 203, 212). The gray-bearded Dōst-Moḥammad Khan died shortly after his conquest and lies buried in the cemetery of the Gāzargāh village, on the outskirts of Herat (Fayẓ Mo-ḥammad Kāteb, p. 77; Holdich, p.



141).

The following decades revealed the precarious hold of the Afghan sovereign over Herat, as internal dissensions and fratricidal wars broke out among the Dorrānis. Dōst-Moḥammad Khan's successor Amir Šir 'Ali Khan (r. 1863-79) left his eleven year old son Ya'qub in command of the city. Throughout much of the 1870s, Herat would be semi-autonomous and in revolt against the Amir, as Ya'qub Khan and his younger brother Ayyub used the city as a base to challenge the authority of their father in Kabul. In 1874, Ya'qub Khan was imprisoned, while his brother was exiled to Persia. In 1879, following the death of Šir 'Ali Khan, Ya'qub was named Amir, while Ayyub Khan returned from a five-year exile in Mašhad to assume the governorship of Herat, later becoming a hero at the Battle of Maywand, as he led a group of *gāzis* and *sardārs* against the British in the Second Anglo Afghan War (q.v.; Fayz Moḥammad, pp. 193-96, 210). After the war, the new Amir, 'Abd-al-Raḥmān Khan (q.v. 1881-1901) defeated Sardār Ayyub Khan and captured Herat, forcing his cousin into exile in Persia once again. Although this time, Sardār Ayyub Khan was taken from the Afghan borderlands to Tehran, he continued to raise British fears that he would conspire with the Russians to recapture Herat. In 1887, he fled from Persia and made one last desperate and unsuccessful march toward the city (E'temād-al-Salṭana, pp. 165, 512-14, 523).

Unsure of the Afghan state project, the British came to reconsider the "question of Herat" with the Foreign Secretary Lord Salisbury suggesting that Herat be ceded to Persia at the conclusion of the war. Although the Government of India countered that such a move would alienate the Afghans and possibly even open Khorasan to the Russians, the Foreign Office approved a plan to cede Herat and parts of Sistān to Persia on the condition that Nāṣer-al-Din Shah assent to have British officers resident in the city, to resist Russian encroachments, to not oppose a railway scheme from Qandahār to Herat, and to consider the opening of the Karun River in southwest-ern Persia to navigation. In December 1879, the British Government offered Herat to Persia on these terms, and Nāṣer-al-Din Shah accepted. Two months later, when the Shah suddenly insisted on an unconditional occupation of Herat and Sistān, the plan was dropped (Sykes, pp. 134-35; Greaves, p. 403).

Subsequently, the question of Herat came to rest on the security of its northern frontier and the fate of the Turkmen tribes on the peripheries of the valley. Both the Russians and the British took measures to tame the so-called "wild" and "turbulent" Turkmen tribes of Khorasan (Marvin, pp. 1-29,



316-406). The Turkmen frontier remained beyond the pale of both the Persian and Af-ghan states. Following the failure of the 1860-61 Marv campaign, the Qajars abandoned much of the Turkmen country on Persia's northeastern frontiers to the Russians, who sought to fill the void by colonizing Turkmenistan (Amanat, p. 419).

Between the 1860s and 1880s, Russia pursued a policy of pacification, either annexing or capturing the Turkmen oases of Central Asia: Tashkent and Khokand in 1866, Samarqand and Bukhara in 1868, Khiva in 1873. In 1878, a Russian staff officer, Colonel N. L. Grodekov, rode from Samarqand to Herat, surveying the route and the city's defenses. In 1881, a Russian army under General Mikhael Skobelev captured the fortress of Geok Tepe ("Blue Hill") at Akhal, defeating the powerful Tekke tribe in what some have called "the last stand of the Turkmen" (Hopkirk, p. 402). In 1884, the Russians completed their pacification of the Tekke by annexing the oasis of Marv and moving the Russian frontier even closer to Herat. Advancing in a line from the eastern shore of the Caspian toward the Morḡāb country, paralleling the course of the nascent Trans-Caspian Railroad, the Russians had annexed sections of the Yamut, Salor, and Tekke, making an "ethnographical claim" on the Turkmen tribes (Marvin, pp. 111-16).

At the same time, the Russians were extending the Trans-Caspian Railroad further into Central Asia (O'Donovan; Marvin). As Russian troops continued to pursue the pacification of the Turkmen, the British attempted to secure northern Afghanistan and the Herat region through the making of borders. Russian advances in the region alarmed the Government of India, which pressed for the settlement of the Afghan frontier. Already by 1884, cartographers in St. Petersburg had printed an official map that placed the Russian border at twenty miles from Herat (Greaves, p. 69). Because Herat's fertile valley possessed the resources to maintain a large army and a strategic location on the road to Qandahār, it came to be seen as "the gate to India." British opinion wavered between the principles of "masterly inactivity" and a forward policy, which advocated that the British seize Herat before the Russians did (Marvin, p. 52; Greaves, pp. 394-401). Moreover, Herat remained largely out of Amir 'Abd-al-Raḥmān Khan's control, whose apathy and disregard for the region had also led the Qajars to station troops in the Bādḡis (q.v.; Sykes, pp. 160-61). In 1884, however the British and Russian Governments agreed that a joint boundary commission should survey and delimit the northern border of Afghanistan, a four-hundred mile stretch



between the Hari Rud and the Oxus (Holdich, p. 99; Greaves, p. 69).

In the winter of 1885 however, Russian troops from Akhal and Marv marched up the Morġāb River towards the Panjdeh Oasis, claiming that the Sarik Turkmen of the Panjdeh were independent of Afghanistan and part of the Turkmen nation of Akhal and Marv. The following spring, a large Russian force attacked and handily defeated five hundred Afghan soldiers dispatched to defend the oasis. In what became known as the “Panjdeh Incident,” the Russians annexed the oasis, heightening fears about the security of Herat and nearly bringing about a war with Britain (Sykes, pp. 163-64). But there would be no war, only the demarcation of a boundary. The Joint Afghan Boundary Commission concluded its work in 1887, with the Russians retaining Panjdeh, which they exchanged with Afghanistan for the strategically important Du’l-faqār Pass, “the old plundering road of the Turkmen and the traditional way out of Persia” (Greaves, p. 77).

Subsequently, Amir ‘Abd-al-Raḥmān Khan, in his zeal to fortify Herat against an attack and with the approval of the British, leveled the *madrasa* and mosque in Herat’s northern suburb of the Moṣallā (Holdich, p. 143; Yate, p. 65). In addition, thousands of workmen from the countryside were employed to plow a series of cemetery mounds north of the city, even though the people of Herat submitted petitions to the Amir requesting that the graves not be disturbed (Yate, p. 25). Moreover, armed Afghan irregulars wearing English red coats poured into the city, temporarily displacing much of the civilian population (Yate, p. 29).

Although Herat was incorporated into the buffer state of Afghanistan under the strong rule of Amir ‘Abd-al-Raḥmān Khan, in some ways the city remained a provincial outpost, isolated from the rest of the country. Though the Amir introduced major changes in taxation and land tenure, he opposed road building and telegraphs, fearing they would undermine the natural independence afforded by Afghanistan’s mountains. As a consequence, regionalism prevailed in Afghanistan. ‘Abd-al-Raḥmān’s grandson, Amir Amān-Allāh Khan (r. 1919-29) opened and improved roads in his efforts to modernize Afghanistan’s transportation networks but was overthrown by tribal and religious uprisings in 1929. It was not until the 1960s, when the Soviet Union built the Herat-Qandahār highway, that a modern road connected Herat to the country’s other urban centers (Rubin, pp. 49, 55, 66).



BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abbas Amanat, *Pivot of the Universe: Nāṣer-al-Din Shah Qajar and the Iranian Monarchy, 1831-1896*, Berkeley. George N. Curzon, *Russia in Central Asia*, London, 1889.
- Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan*, Princeton, 1973.
- J. P. Ferrier, *Caravan Journeys and Wanderings in Persia, Afghanistan, Turkestan, and Beloochistan*, London, 1856.
- Rose Greaves, *Persia and the Defense of India, 1884-1892*, London, 1959.
- Angus Hamilton, *Afghanistan*, London, 1906.
- T. H. Holdich, *The Indian Borderland, 1880-1900*, London, 1901.
- E'temād-al-Saltāna, *Ruz-nāma-ye Kāterāt*, ed. I. Afšār, Tehran, 1976.
- Fayz Moḥammad Kāteb, *Serāj al-tawāriḡ*, 3 vols. Kabul, 1912.
- G. B. Malleson, *Herat: The Granary and Garden of Central Asia*, London, 1880.
- Charles Marvin, *Merv, Queen of the World; and the Man-Stealing Turcomans*, London, 1881.
- Idem, *Colonel Grodekoff's Ride from Samarkand to Herat*, London, 1880.
- Idem, *The Russians at Merv and Herat*, London, 1883.
- Idem, *The Russians at the Gates of Herat*, New York, 1885.
- Idem, *The Railway Race to Herat*, London, 1885.
- Oskar Niedermayer, *Im Weltkrieg vor Indiens Toren*, Hamburg, 1936.
- Edmund O'Donovan, *The Merv Oasis: Travels and Adventures East of the Caspian during the years 1879-80-81, including Five Months Residence among the Tekkes of Merv*, 2 vols. London, 1882.



Barnett Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, New Haven, 2002.

Freya Stark, *The Minaret of Djam*, London, 1970.

Percy Sykes, *A History of Afghanistan*, 2 vols. London, 1940.

Arminius Vambery, *Travels in Central Asia*, London, 1864.

Idem, *Central Asia and the Anglo-Russian Frontier Question*, London, 1874.

A. C. Yate, *Travels with the Afghan Boundary Commission*, Edinburgh, 1887.

C. E. Yate, *Northern Afghanistan*, Edinburgh, 1888.