

The Third Anglo-Afghan War: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

The third Anglo-Afghan war holds a very unique place in the histories of both Afghanistan and Great Britain. Afghanistan wasn't sovereign in its foreign affair in the times of Amir Abdul Rehman and Amir Habibullah Khan and the young Amanullah detested this greatly and decided that the first step of Afghanistan towards modernism should be its external sovereignty. It was, so to speak, a stepping stone for Afghanistan's quest for modernism. A dream that Amanullah had dreamed since a very young age and was now almost in his grasp. For the British, it marked the beginning of the decay of their hold on the sub-continent. They were already war-weary and were losing control over the sub-continent due to various political activities of the nationalists of the sub-continent. The third Anglo-Afghan served as another one of these agitations and sure was an agitation. This agitation was witnessed in the British literature after the war in several books written by people who had served in the British military force during the time of war. This article will closely analyze the events of the third Anglo-Afghan war and the consequences of the war along with the treaty signed after it and, based on the analyzed data,

conclude who took what benefits from the war and what losses both suffered. It will be claimed that both countries, won the war and lost it. won it in some ways and lost it in some other ways, and that by the end of it both countries found themselves the subjects of the classic observation that, in war, there are neither victors nor the defeated. The significance of this article is that it will look at the events of the war from various perspectives, namely; Afghan, British and non-biased perspectives and conclude respectively.

Keywords: History, Afghanistan, War of Independence, Modernization, Great Britain, King Amanullah Khan, Nadir Khan

Introduction

The first thing we need to understand is the circumstances of the Amir's succession. On February 19, 1919, Amir Habibullah Khan is assassinated (Olsen, 1995, p. 101) during a shooting session in Laghman and there were three potential successors to the Amir: Nasrullah (younger brother of Habibullah), Inayat Ullah (eldest son of Habibullah), Amanullah (youngest son of Habibullah).

By potential successors, it is meant they were eligible for the throne based on Sharia Law, or the Afghan ways of a succession of the throne or through some other means. The rightful heir to the throne, as per Sharia Law, should have been the uncle i.e. Nasrullah but Amir Abdul Rehman had decreed in his time that the Amir should be chosen by the people, but if acceptable, it should pass on to the eldest son, thus making Inayat Ullah the rightful heir. However, Inayat Ullah had no desire to rule Afghanistan so he accepted the succession of Nasrullah (Macmunn, 1929, p. 258).

Amanullah was eligible for the throne for several reasons. First, he had the support of many important personalities among the Afghan nobles, including his mother and Mahmud Tarzi, an important person both among the nobles and the Afghan intellectuals (Katrak, 1929, p. 24). Amanullah had been brought up by his mother and teachers according to the ideals of modernism, or at least as much as Afghan society of that time would allow. So, in a way, he was the host of the sentiments of all those who dreamed to modernize Afghanistan. second, young Amanullah was in control of the military and the national treasury in Kabul at that time and declared himself the Amir in the capital city of Afghanistan (Popal, 2011, p. 29). and it was just a matter of time for the other two accept him as the new Amir of Afghanistan. Nasrullah was accused of conspiring the assassination and put in jail, who later died in his cell (Ghubar, 1990, p. 171).

The matter of succession was solved decisively by Amanullah but the Afghan people did not turn a blind eye to his actions. Especially the mullah community who supported the succession of Nasrullah for two reasons. One, that his succession was in harmony with Sharia; two, because Nasrullah was a more religiously inclined figure compared to Amanullah and Inayat Ullah. Therefore, the Amir turned his attention towards the British influence on the foreign affairs of Afghanistan, and automatically earned the approval of the mullah community (Poullada, 1973, p. 59). He meant to accomplish two things by a single action. However, confronting the British-Indian influence on the external independence of the country was a difficult task because challenging that authority was challenging the crown itself. Thus, from the very beginning, the Amir was a bold and ambitious man. In his letter to the viceroy in India, he clearly states his

plans for Afghanistan which conflicted with the interests of Britain (Shah, 1933, p. 110).

There were two reasons behind this boldness of Amanullah. First, the British had exhausted themselves in the first world war and had suffered immensely economically. Second, the postmaster at Peshawar—who was an informant for Amanullah—had told him that India was ready to revolt against the British Raj and an attempt of invasion of the Afghan troops was enough to end the British Raj in India (Adamec, 1967, p. 119). Another reason was that Amanullah had many allies and sympathizers to aid him in the war; the “fanatic” tribal belt (Syed, 2005, p. 315) at the Durand line, a good portion of Indian politicians and the provincial Government of India which resided in Kabul (Macmunn, 1929, p. 259). The primary objective of the war declared on the British Raj was to get back the external sovereignty of Afghanistan and engage in a meaningful relationship with the modern world (Adamec, 1967, p. 111). A British agent reported that during the durbar of 13th April 1919, the Amir said the following words: “I have declared myself and my country entirely free, autonomous and independent both internally and externally. My country will hereafter be as independent a state as the other states and powers of the world are. No foreign power will be allowed to have a hairsbreadth of right to interfere internally or externally with the affairs of Afghanistan, and if any ever does, I am ready to cut its throat with this sword” (Adamec, 1967, p. 110). A lot of things were going on in the world at that time and the world was entering a new age. An age that determined the course of the world’s social and political development. In such nascent stages, there is a lot of uncertainty and such uncertainties result in conflict, most of which are sometimes long and often result in many unpleasanties. In such conflicts

there are no winners, not on the surface, everyone in them receives their share of blows. Such is the story of the third Anglo-Afghan war as well. The literature that came out of this war was as much a mess as the war itself. Historians constantly disagree as to what caused the war, the course of the war and the outcomes that were produced because of the war. There are three kinds of historians who have worked on the Third-Anglo war; The Afghan, British and Russian historians.

The Afghan view of the war is also not linear, some called it the holy war while others had a more nationalist view of it. there were also those who held both views. Almost all the Afghan literature on the war claimed that Afghanistan had been victorious in the war both militarily and politically. But if that is to be believed, the battlefield analysis which will be done later would suggest otherwise. The British people considered the acts of the Amir evil. One such writer was Lt. George Macmunn, who wrote an extremely biased account of the war and called the Amir evil because of his acts against the interest of the crown. The position of the British government was understandable in this regard because they had been giving annual subsidy the Afghan Amir for generations so they could use Afghanistan as a buffer state or a barrier between them and the Soviets. So, their condemnation of Amir was understandable even if not acceptable. Almost all British sources used to claim that the war was a military win for Britain. Some British historians like Sykes claimed the war started because the people of Afghanistan suspected he was behind the assassination of his father, to divert their attention from himself to the British he united the entire nation and declared war in the name of independence. Others claimed that Afghanistan was just having high hopes and was making use of the nationalist movements in India to further fuel conflicts in India and

produce disturbances and use them for their own cause and weaken the hold of the British forces in India. The Soviet accounts of the war of 1919, claim that the Afghans were anti-imperialists and were left with no choice but to take up arms against the British to gain their external freedom (Reysner, 1967, pp. 310, 311). by saying that, the Soviets were projection their own hostility towards imperialism on the Afghan people. All in all, the idea of total liberation of Afghanistan gained Amanullah the much-needed support (Shah, *The Afghanistan of Afghans* , 1928, p. 197).

At that time, things had been favorable for Afghanistan because the Germans, Turks, and Soviets had already recognized the independence of Afghanistan and there had been social and political unrests in the both India and Egypt (Gregorian, 1969, p. 230). The foremost objectives of the war were stated by the Amir Himself in the following words:

“O nation with a nice sense of honor!

“O brave army!

“Firstly, the government of Afghanistan should be externally and internally independent and free, that all rights of the Government possessed by other independent powers of the world, should be possessed in their entirety by Afghanistan.

“Secondly, that you should unite with me with all your force in avenging the unlawful assassination of my father, the martyr, who was spiritually a father to all of you.

“Thirdly, that the nation should be free, that is to say, that no individual should be oppressed or subjected to any high-handedness or tyranny by any other individual....” (Shah, *The Tragedy of Amanullah* , 1933, p. 105).

It wasn't just the Amir who was ready for war. His trusted minister Mahmud Tarzi sent a letter to an envoy in India, saying:

"Put excitement in the newspapers, what is more, wonderful is that fighting will commence again between English and Germans and there too [in Europe] the English are involved in calamities and, God willing, the English have been destroyed . . . Hindus and Moslems drank water in the same vessels. The English were designated as Namak Haram [ingrates] in speeches because after coming to India, they have fed themselves fully and starved the people.... brethren! Look to the Indians to what extent they have been persecuted and that they are facing the guns. All this is due to the tyranny and oppression by the English. Read, and curse the tyrants. Curse on the English. Curse on the tyrants." (Stewart, 1973, p. 47).

Considering the hostility of the subcontinent and Afghanistan, the third Anglo-Afghan war was imminent. And this hostility had been generations old, no diplomatic endeavor would have been enough to heal the generations-old wound. War was the only healing agent at that time and the people of Afghanistan were determined to rub the old wound off no matter what the cost.

Analysis of Strength:

The following data has been taken from an official document compiled in India under the supervision of British military headquarters sometime after the war.

A) British

The British military forces at that time were divided into three subcategories. One of these categories was assigned to the Head Quarters and the other two to the southern and Northern regions. The division of the forces is given in Table 1.1. (Third Afghan War: Official Account, 1926, p. 16)

Table 1.1, Division of British forces in 1919

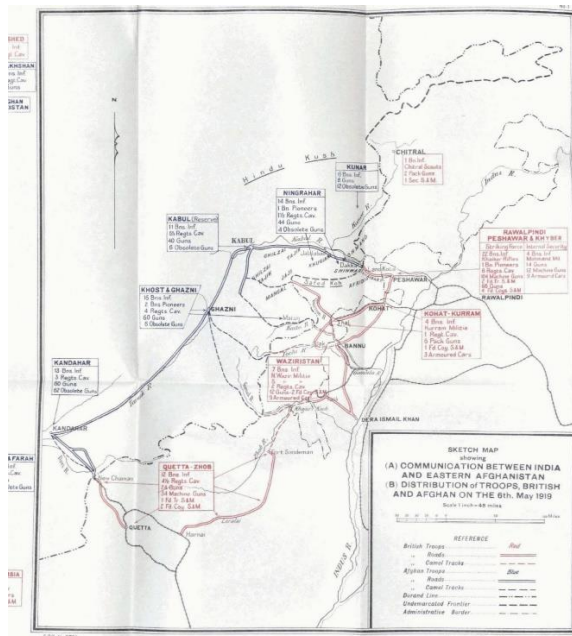
Army Headquarters	Southern Army	Northern Army
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12th Mounted Brigade (Baleli, near Quetta.) • 4th Division (Quetta). • 8th Division (Lucknow). • Burma Division. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5th Division (Mhow). • 9th Division (Sikandarabad¹). • Independent Brigades: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Karachi. ○ Bombay. ○ Divisional Area, Poona. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1st Cavalry Brigade (Risalpur). • 4th Cavalry Brigade (Meerut). • 10th Cavalry Brigade (HQ and 1 regiment Peshawar.) • 1 regiment (Mardan). • 1 regiment (Rawalpindi) • 16th Division (Lahore) • Independent Brigades in Kohat, Banu, Derajat and the Divisional area, Meerut.

Out of the above-mentioned forces, only 1st, 2nd, 4th and 16th divisions were stationed at the NWFP, with the 1st, 4th and 16th Cavalry Brigade and 12th mounted Brigade. The demobilization of the British army had taken place and most of the high-ranking officers has left for England (Third Afghan War: Official Account, 1926, p. 17).

The task of the forces at the borders was to ensure internal security and nothing more. The absence of mechanics and technical workers in the army also proved very disastrous for the British army at the time of the war.

¹ The original document of the Indian report on the 1919 Anglo-Afghan war published in 1926 spells it "Secunderabad".

Many soldiers were absent at that time from their stations. When the war broke out 182 Battalions of Indian infantries and 131 Squadrons of Indian Cavalry were sent out of India. The British were at luck at one thing, in that some of the demobilized armies at that time remained in India due to shipping problems and there used to assist the British in the war. Supplies for 60 days for the field army had been divided between stations in the west of Indus while the other half at Lahore, Karachi, and Bombay. While proved to be scarce during the war (Third Afghan War: Official Account, 1926, p. 21). General Sir A. A. Barratt commanded the North-West Frontier Force while Lieutenant General R. Wapshare commanded the forces at the Baluchistan. While supplies were insufficient during the war for the British Army, the lack of transport proved more troublesome.



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B) Afghanistan

¹ This map shows the forces of British India and Afghanistan at borders.

The real strength of the Afghan military primarily relied upon the shoulders of the population of Afghanistan. On the surface, what drove these people were religious and patriotic sentiments but some of these people were purely driven by the love for plunder. Every one of these people would come with his own rifle, knife and a considerable supply of flour in sheepskins. The British military forces had expected 20,000 men in battles at one place but the number was considerably low in the battles. In addition to the people's own rifles, the Amir had a reserve of arms at the Capital with about 15,000 small-bore rifles and 400,000 martinis.

The Afghan Army, on the other hand, comprised of 78 Battalions of infantry, 21 Regiments of Cavalry including 280 breach-load guns and 280 muzzleloaders making a total of 38,000 rifles and 4,000 artillerymen with 8,000 sabers (Third Afghan War: Official Account, 1926, p. 25).

Afghan Military forces had been divided into 10 military districts that were situated on the borders (excluding the capital, which was one of the military districts). 4 of these military districts were near the Russian and Persian borders while the other 5 were with British India; namely Jalalabad, Ghazni, Kandahar, Khost and Mukur. (Third Afghan War: Official Account, 1926, pp. 18, 19)

Table 1.2, Division of Afghan Forces in 1919

Kunar	Ningarhar/ Khyber	Khost	Kandahar	Kabul
• 6 Battalion Infantry.	• 14 Battalion Infantry.	• 16 Battalion Infantry.	• 13 Battalion Infantry.	• 11 Battalion Infantry.
• 6 Pack guns.	• 1 Battalion Pioneer. • 1 ½ regiment Cavalry. • 44 guns.	• 2 Battalion n Pioneer. • 4 Regime	• 3 Regime Cavalry. • 60 guns.	• 5 ½ regiment Cavalry. • 43 guns.

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Cavalry.

- 60 guns
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Battles

The third Anglo-Afghan war took place in three phases.

A) Phase 1 and 2

The newly appointed Commander-in-chief of Afghanistan had been sent to Dhakka a few days prior to the initiation of war on that front (Adamec, 1967, p. 111). A few coolies had been killed on the Indian front and the murdered had alleged that he was acting under Afghan influence (Shah, Modern afghanistan , 1939, p. 107). Between Afghan outpost of Dakka and British outpost at Khyber Pass, there was a land called Bagh, the demarcation of which had not yet been clear between the Afghan and British people. Several attempts had been made to no avail. Commander-in-chief Sirdar Saleh had sent a letter to the British officials telling them he intended to build a fort there (Stewart, 1973, p. 48). Some Afghan soldiers occupied Bagh at night and a neighboring village called Kafirkot. This phase of the war took place from 6th May-25th May during which several penetrations from the Afghan Army had been attempted. During this phase around 200 Afghans were killed and 400 wounded, and 25 British officers were killed and 157 wounded. This greatly demoralized the Afghan forces at Dakka (Third Afghan War: Official Account, 1926, p. 43)the British commanders at Khost would have taken an offensive stance but they didn't have enough forces there due to issues of transport

mentioned above. Therefore, they were forced to take a defensive stance. The British were compelled to wait for the attack led by the ex-commander-in-chief who had been approaching Matun and would then decide what action to take. He had about 14 Battalions and 43 guns at his disposal (Third Afghan War: Official Account, 1926, p. 52). Nadir Shah had arrived at Matun on 19th of May, had established contacts with the Afridi and on 23rd May, he was reported to have been seen at Spinwam and was occupied by Afghans. On 26th May he arrived at Thal (Sykes, 1940, p. 279).

Meanwhile, the Tochi wazirs had joined the troops of Nadir Khan and the wazirs of the northern Waziristan also joined their tribesman in the mutiny. Shahwali, the brother of Nadir Khan, had been thinking about invading Wana. The British had now decided that they would evacuate Wana and Gomal and during this retreat of Major Russell, some of his men were injured and killed (Third Afghan War: Official Account, 1926, p. 55). The retirement of Major Russell excited some tribes of Zhob who were enlisted in the Militia and deserted their positions. According to Sykes, these tribesmen had been punished by the end of June because their desertion had caused a lot of deaths.

Nadir Khan besieged Thal as soon as he arrived and the Afghan forces had started shelling the fort at Thal. They had initial problems with the placement of the guns but a Muslim scholar named Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi gives an account of the measures he had taken to ensure the efficient aim of the Howitzer guns (Sindhi, 1993, p. 70). Nadir Khan had great confidence in Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi and always took the major decisions by consulting him. The Afghan regular forces had occupied the village of Thal and howitzers were fired on the fort. Momentary relief was

acquired by the British Air force when they bombed two gun-placements of the Afghans (Ghano, 2010, p. 22). Nadir Khan was in a good position until Dyer arrived with the reinforcements and the Afghans withdrew their ranks without the loss of any men. Nadir Khan later sent a letter to Dyer informing him that he had withdrawn because of the orders of the Amir and the Armistice had been declared (Sykes, 1940, p. 280).

The British had strong forces on the territory near Jalalabad and would have started marching towards it on 28th of May (Hadad, 2003, p. 503) but Afghan Forces had arrived at Kurram. The reinforcements that had been sent to Kohat for the Invasion of Afghan Territories was diverted back to British territory at this point.

Abdul Rehman, an Afghan envoy who had been sent to India before the war had begun unofficial negotiations with the British authorities since 15th May and by the end of May the Amir asked for an Armistice and the war had come to an end by 3rd June when the request was accepted by the Viceroy (Zafar, 1960, p. 839). The following were the terms of the Armistice (Third Afghan War: Official Account, 1926, p. 50):

“1. That you should withdraw all your troops at once from the frontier.

No Afghan troops are to be located within 20 miles of the nearest British Forces.

2. That the British troops should remain where they now are in the Afghan territory, with the freedom to continue such military precautions and operations as may be deemed necessary. But that they will not take any offensive action so long as the terms of Armistice have been observed by your side.

3. British Aircraft will not bomb or machine gun Afghan localities or forces so long as the armistice is observed, but they will have freedom of

movement in the air to reconnoiter and observe the positions of Afghan forces in order to ensure against any concentration to a collection of the Afghan forces or tribesmen in contravention to the armistice.

And so on...”

B) Phase 3

Phase three consisted of minor hostilities at the borders by tribesmen and may or may not have acted under the orders of the Army officials of Afghanistan.

Conclusion

The conclusion of this war is a rather complicated one, the shades which can be seen even in our times, namely the tug-of-war over the Durand line. While the Afghans had an upper hand during the battle at Khost and Thal and secured many outposts there, the British had an upper hand throughout the entire war as can be seen from the events of phase 1 and 2. The Afghan morale had been gravely crushed at the battle at Dakka and had there not been an armistice, the British may have been able to invade some regions of Afghanistan.

Amir Amanullah saw his eventual defeat at the battle coming and therefore sent a request of the armistice, which was a very wise and strategic decision, considering the British state of the demobilized army, internal conflicts of nationalists in India and their intrinsic war weariness because of world war 1 and their economy had dropped considerably. General Dyer had been the army officer, who had been responsible for the Jallianwala Bagh incident and the Indians had started to show aggressive hostility against the British. The British were hoping for negotiations and the Amir needed them as he was losing the war on the field. The negotiations ended

and the treaty was signed in 1922. The Afghans won because they achieved their primary goal of making Afghanistan an independent country in both its internal and external affairs but they had the disadvantage of no longer having a firm claim over the territory beyond the Durand line because that was the price they had to pay for their freedom. otherwise, they would have faced certain defeat on the field.

The British too lost in certain aspects despite the fact they had won numerous battles on the field and would have eventually won the war at the expense of some resources and great hostility from their newly invaded territory of Afghanistan. they could not afford any more hostilities because the ones in India itself had been distressing them for a very long time. Invading new lands of Afghanistan would have only added more distress to their already increasing pile. By the middle of June 1919 they merely wanted to get their complications solved with the Afghans. They did, however, lose their influence on Afghan policies which had till this point given them a great advantage over the Bolsheviks, now, however, they were exposed from that side and had to be careful in building good diplomatic relations with Afghanistan without forcing them to do anything according to their will. Thus, Afghanistan gained its freedom while the British turned their attention towards their own problems and Afghanistan was ushered into a transformation they had never witnessed before.

The war was therefore neither won nor lost by any side. Both had some advantages and some disadvantages to face and had to cope with the problems they were facing. Each adapted to their circumstances and thrived in their own way as best as they could.

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