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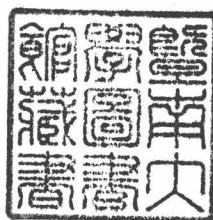
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A HISTORY OF AFGHANISTAN

By
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This book is dedicated to
BRITISH FRONTIER OFFICERS
IN ASIA
PAST AND PRESENT

Along many a thousand miles of remote border are to be found our twentieth-century Marcher Lords. The breath of the Frontier has entered into their nostrils and infused their being. Courage and conciliation — for unless they have an instinctive gift of sympathy with the native tribes, they will hardly succeed — patience and tact, initiative and self-restraint, these are the complex qualifications of the modern school of pioneers.

CURZON

PREFACE

FEW countries present problems of greater interest to the historian than landlocked Afghanistan, the counterpart in Asia of Switzerland in Europe.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century B.C. the first great migration of the Aryans swept across this rugged country in their long march from their homeland in Central Asia to the plains of India. We next read of Alexander the Great leading his army up the valley of the Helmand and crossing the mighty range of the Hindu Kush into Bactria, to win laurels in Central Asia. Two years later he again crossed these mountains and marched down the passes into the valley of the Indus to gain fresh victories in the Punjab. From this province he led his war-weary veterans across the deserts of Baluchistan to triumphal celebrations at Susa.

Coming down the ages, we see another famous conqueror in Baber who, after capturing Kabul, founded the Moghul empire of India early in the sixteenth century. From this period his successors were faced with the necessity of maintaining Afghanistan as a buffer state against attacks from the Shahs of Persia to the west, and from the Uzbeg rulers of Bukhara to the north. By the Moghul Emperors Kabul and Kandahar were rightly recognized to be the keys of India and the British, who succeeded the Moghuls, are faced with the same problem today, with Russia as the successor of Bukhara.

I first travelled in Central Asia nearly fifty years ago and, since that journey, I have been a keen student of the problems of which Afghanistan constitutes the kernel. The appointments which I have held have, generally speaking, kept me in touch with Afghanistan,

whether serving as Consul in Seistan, as Consul-General in Khurasan (where I was in political charge of the Herat province through a native Agent), or again as Consul-General in Chinese Turkistan, when I travelled on the Pamirs. For many years I took part in the struggle for influence in Persia with Russia and, during the last Great War, I helped to foil Germany in her designs on Afghanistan by the capture of her supporting missions in Persia.

In writing this work, the first complete history of Afghanistan, my aim has been to supply British officials and the British public with accurate information. If the results of my studies and journeys are also appreciated by Moslems in Afghanistan and India, I shall be doubly rewarded.

P. M. SYKES

THE ATHENAEUM

September 1940

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A HISTORY OF PERSIA

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BRIGADIER-GENERAL SIR PERCY SYKES

K.C.I.E., C.B., C.M.G.

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CHAPTER I

AFGHANISTAN — THE LAND AND THE PEOPLE

That empire, bounded on the north and east by immense mountain ranges, and on the south and west by vast tracts of sandy desert, opposed to external hostility natural defences of a formidable character. The general aspect of the country was wild and forbidding; in the imagination of the people haunted with ghoules and genii; but not unvaried by spots of gentler beauty in the valleys and on the plains, where the fields were smiling with cultivation, and the husbandman might be seen busy at his work.—KAYE, *The War in Afghanistan*.

A Geographical Sketch.—Afghanistan or “the Land of the Afghans”, correctly speaking, has not borne that name until the foundation of the Kingdom of Ahmad Shah, Durrani, in the middle of the eighteenth century. I am, however, for the sake of convenience, using the term throughout this work.¹ The country occupies the north-eastern portion of the arid Iranian plateau.² Northwards it is bounded by the valley of the Oxus and the Central Asian depression and eastwards by the low-lying plains of Northern India, watered by the Indus and its tributaries. Westwards its neighbour is the kingdom of Persia, while southwards in its most waterless area it unites with the deserts of Baluchistan.

The Dimensions of Afghanistan.—From the Persian frontier at Kariz, on the Meshed-Herat road, to the borders of the Indian Empire at the Khaibar Pass, the distance is approximately six hundred miles. The width of the country decreases as it runs from south-west to a

¹ I would acknowledge my indebtedness to the article on Afghanistan which was written by the late M. Longworth Dames for the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*.

² The inhabitants of Persia originally termed themselves Aryans. The modern form of the word is Iran for the country and Iranian for its inhabitants, which form the present Shah has made official. In this work I have generally used Persia, the name originating in the province of Pars, the homeland of the Achaemenian dynasty, which the Greeks termed Persis. It has been employed by Europeans for more than two thousand years and I have retained it, albeit with exceptions, such as in the case of the Iranian plateau, which is, indeed, sometimes employed in an anticipatory sense.

point in the north-east, where an arm consisting of the narrow district of Wakhan, constitutes the eastern end of the Russo-Afghan boundary. At its broadest section, that represented by a line drawn from Kilif on the Oxus to New Chaman, the distance would be some four hundred and fifty miles. The total area aggregates 250,000 square miles, which is slightly larger than that of France, while the population may be estimated at about ten millions.

A Comparison with Switzerland.—Afghanistan may be described as the Switzerland of Southern Asia. Both countries are essentially mountainous and contain main ranges and the sources of important rivers; both are situated inland, lacking contact with ocean or sea. Again, these two countries alike are inhabited by many different races who have heard the tramp of invaders marching towards the sunny south. Finally, in the crossing of the Mount Joux Pass (now the St. Bernard) by medieval English or French pilgrims bound for Rome, we have their counterpart in Afghanistan of Hsuan-tsang the Buddhist pilgrim from distant China, seeking to learn "the wisdom of the west" in India.

The Boundaries.—The limits of Afghanistan, until comparatively recently, were ill-defined and, during the last fifty years have been settled by numerous commissions, which will be dealt with in this work. Here it is merely intended to supply an outline.

Starting from Zulfikar Pass, at the north-west corner, the boundary runs eastwards to Kushk, the terminus of a branch line of the Russian Central Asian Railway from the junction at Merv. Continuing, it follows a north-easterly direction and strikes the Oxus in the district of Khamiab. That great river, or its tributary the Pamir River, then forms the boundary of Afghan Turkistan, of Badakhshan and of Wakhan to Sir-i-Kul (Lake Victoria) on the Pamirs. The boundary continuing through the lake follows the northern boundary of Wakhan to its junction with the Chinese Empire in the inaccessible range of Sarikol.

Turning south-westwards from this point the frontier

follows the crest of the Hindu Kush, bending gradually southwards and marching with the North-West Frontier Province until it reaches Kafiristan. Here the lofty Shawal range running southwards divides the Bashgol Valley of Kafiristan from the parallel Valley of Chitral. Further south Dir and Malakand lie on the British side of the frontier, and the Kabul-Peshawar frontier is reached at Landi Kotal to the east of the historical Khaibar Pass. The boundary is thence carried to the lofty Safid Kuh and, passing below the Peiwar Kotal, it includes Waziristan on the Indian side of the boundary and reaches the borders of British Baluchistan at the famous Gumal Pass.

From Domandi, an uninhabited spot at the junction of the Kundar with the Gumal River,¹ to Kuh-i-Malik-i-Siah or "The Mountain of the Black Chief", where the frontier of Persia is reached, is a distance of over eight hundred miles. Generally speaking, it is a desert land with barren mountain ranges and vast open plains, possessing few inhabitants owing to lack of water and of security. Dry torrent beds with boulders or pebbles cover large areas, to be succeeded by equally large areas of sand dunes. The rare springs of water are usually salt or possess unpleasant medicinal properties. But there are very occasionally green wooded valleys with streams of pure water, fertile tracts which give intense pleasure to the sun-scorched traveller, who, as I can bear witness, senses the delicious humidity with its promise of sweet water, from afar.

To give some details of this section: the boundary follows up the Kundar River to the highlands of Khurasan, rising to an altitude of 7000 feet, where, dividing the drainage flowing into Afghanistan to the north and west from that flowing into India on the south and east, the watershed is reached. Here the frontier trends in a south-westerly direction to the British railhead at New Chaman. Thence it turns to the south until, opposite Nushki, it takes a generally westerly direction to the Kuh-i-Malik-i-Siah.

¹ Vide "The Southern Borderlands of Afghanistan," by A. H. McMahon, *Royal Geographical Society Journal*, April 1897.

It is interesting to note that, as far as Nushki, the tribes on both sides of the frontier are Afghans; westwards they are Baluchis and Brahuis. From Chagai, situated on the Lora Hamun, the Registan Desert gives place to rugged black mountain masses, rising to 7000 feet, with practically no population, while water presents a very serious difficulty. Upon approaching the boundary of Persia, the Kuh-i-Taftan,¹ rising to 12,600 feet, is clearly visible.

Before actually reaching the Kuh-i-Malik-i-Siah, the Gaud-i-Zirra, which falls entirely to Afghanistan, is passed. It is a salt water lake some twenty-five miles long by five miles wide and is occasionally fed, in years of exceptional flood, by overflow water from the Helmand. From the boundary mountain of the three states the Perso-Afghan boundary turns north-east to Kuhak, the site of a dam in the Helmand. Owing to the wayward nature of this river, as we shall see in Chapter LV, a British Commission was despatched in 1903 which settled the exact border-line, and part of the *Hamun* was awarded to Afghanistan. Continuing our survey northwards, the boundary has quite recently been fixed throughout and strikes the Hari Rud at a point where that river forms the boundary, at first with Persia and later with Russia. This completes our brief survey of Afghan boundaries, a subject which will form the theme of more than one chapter in this work.

Mountains.—Taking its origin at a point where the Himalayas end in a number of gigantic peaks, this mighty range is termed the Hindu Kush. The origin of the name has been a source of some controversy. Ibn Battuta, the great Moslem traveller, wrote in A.D. 1334: "The mountain is called Hindu Kush, since slave boys and girls who are brought from India die there in large numbers as a result of the extreme cold". The soldiers of Alexander the Great, as we shall see in Chapter V, termed it the Indian Caucasus (it was the Paropanisus of Ptolemy) and Hindu Kush is possibly a corruption of this latter term. To quote Burrard:

¹ For the exploration of this range *vide* Sykes, *Ten Thousand Miles in Persia*, ch. xi.