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Britain fails to learn lessons from repetitious invasion of Afghanistan

2/20/2013



Britain as part of U.S.-led NATO troops will end its occupation of Afghanistan in disgrace after more than 13 years in 2014, with 'this' being the fourth invasion of Afghanistan with the involvement of the UK military.

The British invaded Afghanistan and occupied the capital city of Kabul 174 years ago, only to be violently driven out a few years later.

The occupiers totally misread the complexities of the lands they invaded. Their religion -

Christian and Hindu - was offensive to many Muslim Afghans, who found the heavy-handed policies of these new rulers even more offensive.

A chaotic uprising turned into outright disaster when the invaders, forced to retreat, were all but wiped out as they fled, and this became the story of the UK's first invasion of Afghanistan from 1839 until 1842.

The story is cited in a book by prominent historian William Dalrymple entitled "*Return of a King: The Battle for Afghanistan*".

According to the book, the British Indian "Army of the Indus" confidently attacked Afghanistan in early 1839 with the impression that then Afghan ruler, Dost Mohammad Khan was a threat to British interests, and that Russians were conspiring to launch an attack on British India.

As troops mobilised across India, the governor-general, Lord Auckland, described military action as necessary "to set up a permanent barrier against schemes of aggression on our North West Frontier".

With British troops advancing, Dost Mohammad Khan was forced to escape the country and the deposed Shah Shujah was installed to take his place in the great fortress of Bala Hissar, which swiftly tore down after a while.

"The 20,000-strong Army of the Indus, comprised mostly of Indian sepoy under the command of European East India Company officers, marched into Afghanistan with thousands of camels in train, some equipped with rockets and mortars", according to Dalrymple.

However, Afghans considered the presence of infidel troops on their soil as an anathema, with some of the shah's opponents even willing to recognize the old king (Dost Mohammad). They could not accept a king who was imposed on them by an occupying foreign army.

Before he was deported, Josiah Harlan, an American mercenary who fought for both the East India Company and Dost Mohammad, warned prophetically: "To subdue and crush the masses of a nation by military force, when all are unanimous in the determination to be free, is to attempt the imprisonment of a whole people: all such projects must be temporary and transient, and terminate in a catastrophe ..."

The occupation ended in disaster for the British because of several reasons, one of which was the colonial rulers fighting in another war with China, known as the first Opium War.

The British also interfered in Afghans' religious affairs and sought to alienate religious authorities. One of the British agents in Afghanistan, Alexander Burnes, whose gambling with Afghan women caused outrage, was cut to pieces in front of his residence.

"The revolt quickly spread, and the language of jihad was invoked. The British retreat from Kabul, in deep winter, through treacherous mountain passes, became a part of the Victorian iconography of empire. Pashtun fighters picked off troops one by one; sepoy and camp

followers - servants, mistresses, sundry others - froze in the snow, starved to death, or were captured and sold into slavery. A week later, a single survivor would straggle into the British garrison at Jalalabad”, Dalrymple wrote.

“The shah held on briefly; he was killed by his own godson after he offended one of his few remaining allies. The British were largely done with Afghanistan - Dost Mohammad quietly returned from his exile in India, where he was under house arrest - but only after unleashing the aptly named Army of Retribution on the resistance. Enraged British forces marched right back into the country they had fled, to take back hostages, track down surviving sepoys and mete out punishment”, said Dalrymple.

“They burnt Kabul to the ground, and blew the Char Chatta covered bazaar - renowned not just as one of the supreme wonders of Mughal architecture but as one of the greatest buildings in Central Asia - to pieces. Marauding British troops also committed what today would be classified as war crimes against their Qizilbash [a nominally pro-British Shia minority] and Hindu allies. Indeed, the peaceable Kabul Hindu community that had for centuries survived arbitrary arrests and torture by a whole variety of Afghan rulers bent on extorting their money was wiped out in just forty-eight hours by the depredations of the British ...”

Lord Auckland's humiliating misadventure cost some £15 million (a staggering £50 billion in today's money), led to the loss of some 40,000 lives, and left Afghanistan in chaos.

It was, concluded one survivor, "a war begun for no wise purpose, carried on with a strange mixture of rashness and timidity, [and] brought to a close after suffering and disaster, without much glory attached either to the government which directed, or the great body of troops which waged it."