

Tribal Belt and the Defence of British India: A Critical Appraisal of British Strategy in the North-West Frontier during the First World War

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“History is certainly being made in this corridor...and I am sure a great deal more history is going to be made there in the near future - perhaps in a rather unpleasant way, but anyway in an important way.”
(Arnold J. Toynbee)¹

Introduction

No region of the British Empire afforded more grandeur, influence, power, status and prestige than India. The British prominence in India was unique and incomparable. For this very reason the security and safety of India became the prime objective of British Imperial foreign policy in India. India was the symbol of appealing, thriving, profitable and advantageous British Imperial greatness.

Closely interlinked with the question of the imperial defence of India was the tribal belt² or tribal areas in the North-West Frontier region inhabited by Pashtun ethnic groups. The area was defined topographically as a strategic zone of defence, which had substantial geo-political and geo-strategic significance for the British rule in India. Tribal areas posed a complicated and multifaceted defence problem for the British in India during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Peace, stability and effective control in this sensitive area was vital and indispensable for the security and defence of India.

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¹ Arnold J. Toynbee, ‘Impressions of Afghanistan and Pakistan’s North-West Frontier: In Relation to the Communist World,’ *International Affairs*, 37, No. 2 (April 1961), pp. 161-69.

² Tribal belt or tribal areas was also referred by the British as the ‘land of unruly’, ‘land of the free’, ‘land of the rebels’, and the ‘land of the insolent’.

The British for their administrative expediency divided the Frontier region into settled and tribal areas. The peculiar and weird form of administration devised by the British for the tribal areas has no similarity anywhere in India; its aim was to keep complete control in the hands of the central government so that international as well as domestic issues can be handled promptly and unswervingly. Throughout the British rule tribal belt remained a strategic and tactical conundrum.

During the First World War, the British Government in India was faced with complicated and multifarious problems and challenges in the tribal belt; such as the activities and propaganda of the Central Powers, especially the Germans and the Turks. The influence of Amir of Afghanistan and the rise of Pan-Islamism in the region were some of the grave and disturbing elements which could create catastrophic situation for the British not only in the North West Frontier but in the whole of India. This paper would critically appraise and argue British sensitivity towards the tribal belt and how important was the role of Afghanistan in maintaining peace in the region during the course of the war. The paper will further explain the counter measures adopted by the British to maintain peace and stability and to thwart Central Powers activities and propaganda in the tribal areas.

India: British Imperial prestige

British Empire at its Zenith was one of the most leading colonial and imperialist powers that the world had ever acknowledged and recognised. Her might, size and supremacy had popularized the expression “the sun never sets on the British Empire.”³ British affluence and prosperity depended on its commerce and necessitate protecting and defending the trade routes which became intimately intertwined with the question of national security.⁴

In the midst of its gigantic and huge empire, India was one of its prize-worth possessions. India was the ‘brightest jewel in the imperial crown’: became the symbol of

³*The British Empire: Where the Sun Never Sets*. <http://www.britishempire.co.uk>, (accessed March 12, 2009).

⁴ Sneh Mahajan, *British Foreign Policy, 1874-1914: The Role of India* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 2.

astounding, flourishing, profitable, valuable British Imperial greatness. Viceroy Mayo once said, 'We are determined as long as sun shines in heaven to hold India.'⁵

This paramount prominence to India was particularized by J.W. Smith in the following words:

India, the largest, the longest dominated and exploited of British conquests, the richest field of investment,...and profit, the base of Asiatic expansion, ...the focus of all British strategic aims, the pivot of the Empire, and the bulwark of British world domination, offers,... the most complete demonstration of the workings and results of the colonial system of modern imperialism.⁶

India's prominence was not only due to her own resources and wealth; it was the *sine qua non* in Great Britain's establishment of diplomatic and commercial relationships with the countries in the Africa and Asia. The protection of India, its frontiers and its maritime routes therefore, became an undisputed axiom of British foreign policy. Great Britain made Herculean efforts to make sure that her European Imperialist rivals kept their hands not just off their empire in India but all the states situated in its neighborhood.

As a result, the whole region that stretched from the Central Asian plains down to the Arabian Sea in the south and the Persian Gulf in the southwest had been exposed during the 19th century, to the most delicate and complex diplomatic squabbling's among the big powers of Europe. For the British, France under Napoleon Bonaparte and later on the conquest of Russia in Central Asia was perceived as a serious threat to India. The British feared that Afghanistan might become a staging post for a Russian invasion of India. Afghanistan was therefore, created a buffer state and a barrier against British adversaries with regard to India's security. As a consequence, the western and North-Western frontiers of India assumed importance for the British government in India and thus raised the strategic importance of India's North West Frontier. Sir Walter Strickland explained the imperial policy of Great Britain in these words:

⁵ R. Hyam, *Britain's imperial century, 1815-1914: a study of empire and expansion* (New York: Macmillan, 2002), p. 35.

⁶ J.W. Smith, *The British Conquest of India*.
<http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/ni/vol08/no02/blpi.htm>, (accessed March 2, 2010).

Whenever I have been in a position to see the British Empire at work and to watch it closely, I have found that the difference between that Empire and a band of hypocritical liars, thieves and murderers was more or less microscopic, and sometimes quite indistinguishable.⁷

Tribal Belt and Its Imperial Sensitivity

The North West Frontier region termed by Toynbee as the “cross roads of civilizations”,⁸ due to its strategic location, played a significant role in the historical accounts of the Indian sub-continent. Home to Pashtun⁹ racial groups, which as a consequence of peculiar chronological and physical status have managed to preserve and safeguard an autonomous and independent way of life.¹⁰ For millennia, they confronted all those who wanted to dislocate and extricate them from their strategic position straddling the natural gateways leading from Central Asia into the Indian sub-continent¹¹ and the region witnessed for centuries the ebb and flow of migration, conquest and trade.¹² Throughout its history, the Pashtun belt witnessed a great deal of deed, brutality, valor, sacrifice, friendliness and fortitude.¹³

The tribal belt incorporated and encompassed all the key passes which connect Afghanistan with British India (now Pakistan). All, even the most unreachable and inaccessible are considered as potential ‘gate ways’ and therefore of immense strategic importance.¹⁴ Once known as a *terra incognita*,¹⁵ the tribal belt was defined topographically a strategic zone of defense for British India.¹⁶

⁷ Count Ernst Zu Reventlow, *India: Its importance for Great Britain, Germany and the future of the World* (Berlin: Ernst Stiegefried Mittler & Son, Count Book-Sellers Rochstrasse 68-71) Secret: A translation of a German Book prepared in the Central Intelligence Office (Simla May 1917) German-Indian Scheme, Serial No. 1514, Bundle. No. 83, p. 39. Directorate of Archives and Libraries, Peshawar, Pakistan.

⁸ Noor ul Haq, Rashid Ahmed Khan, & Maqsoodul Hasan Nuri, *Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan Northwest Tribal Belt of Pakistan*.<http://ipripak.org/papers/federally.shtml>, (accessed March 25, 2010)

⁹ Also pronounce as ‘Pakhtun’ or ‘Pathan’. For the sake of this study I will use the term ‘Pashtun’ but will use the original spelling in direct quotation.

¹⁰ David Ditcher, *The North West Frontier of Pakistan: A Study in Regional Geography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 1.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game: On Secret Service in High Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 69.

¹³ Arthur Swinson, *North West Frontier People and Events 1839-1947* (London: Hutchinson and Co Ltd., 1967), p. 18.

¹⁴ Harris Leslie, ‘A Scientific Frontier for India: Background to the “Forward Policy of the Nineties”’, *Canadian Journal of History* Vol.1, No.1 (March, 1966), pp. 46-71.

The Frontier was closely intertwined with the overall British India's imperial policy in the region. The area was integral part of their grand strategy to counter their adversaries in the region.¹⁷ As General Fredrick Roberts once stated 'it is essential that we should have with us the tribes who occupy the intervening country,... if they are with us, we need no anxiety; if they are against us, we shall be in serious straits,'¹⁸ and 'they are a great factor in the defence of the North-west frontier of India.'¹⁹ According to Matthew W. Williams 'despite the challenges of managing such a lawless frontier...,the British government in India believed that maintaining peace and stability along the border with Afghanistan was a strategic necessity.'²⁰ For the British, tribal belt was a strategic zone, a no man land, a buffer zone, a buffer to a buffer, a bulwark and it served as a second line for the defence of India.

The perception of administrative frontier was replaced after the Second Anglo-Afghan War by a frontier to be called as the "Scientific Frontier," as part of the "ring fence" strategy of the British Empire.²¹ Mortimer Durand, the famous frontier officer, put forward radical and comprehensive new frontier policy and argued that the area be turn into an active defensive barrier and the tribes who held the major itineraries and passes must be controlled and close relations may be establishment and developed the with tribes.²²

After the Russian ascendancy of Muslim Khanates in Central Asia "Peace and progress on the Frontier was of little concern...Security was the all-important

¹⁵John Dickson Poynder, 'A Bird's-Eye View of the North-West Frontier', *National Review*, 28:163(September, 1896), pp. 103-18.

¹⁶ Sana Haroon, *Frontier of Faith: Islam in the Indo-Afghan Borderland* (London: Hurst & Company, 2007), p. 5.

¹⁷ S. Akbar Ahmad, 'Pukhtun Tribes in the Great Game: Waziristan Case', in Fazal-ur-Rahim Marwat & Sayed Wiqar Ali Shah Kakakhel, (ed.) *Afghanistan and the Frontier* (Peshawar: Emjay Books International, 1993), pp. 201-2.

¹⁸ *Secret Notes on the Central Asian Question and the Coast and Frontier Defences of India 1877-1893*, pp.94.-5. L/MIL/17/14/80.

¹⁹ 'Little Wars on the Indian Frontier', *Blackwoods Edinburgh Magazine*, 157: 956 (June, 1895), p. 930.

²⁰ Matthew W. Williams, *The British colonial experience in Waziristan and its applicability to current operations: A Monograph*, p. 14.

²¹ Peter J. Brobst, *The Future of the Great Game: Sir Olaf Caroe, India's Independence, and the Defense of Asia*. (Akron, Ohio: The University of Akron Press, 2005), p. 36.

²² G. J. Alder, *British India's Northern Frontier 1865-95: A Study in Imperial Policy* (London: Longmans, 1963), p. 158.

objective.”²³ “Tribal territory” J.W. Spain argued “was a marchland which must be dominated.”²⁴In General Fredrick Roberts’s opinion “nothing will strengthen our military position more than to open out the country and improve our relations with the Frontier tribes”²⁵ and “transforming that great natural obstacle, which has hitherto been a barrier against ourselves, into a barrier against one enemies.”²⁶ Henry Green one of the robust supporters of forward policy considered frontier tribesmen potential source of defence against an attacking army. ‘Such races, I consider’, he said ‘one of the best defence that we could have in the rear and flanks of an invading army.’²⁷The famous newspaper of the 19th century ‘*The Edinburgh Magazine*’ also acknowledged the region geo-political significance and wrote ‘the tribes are necessary to us as guardians of the passes; but they must be brought to hold them for us, not against us’.²⁸

Thus, the tribes were considered a great factor in the defence of the North-west frontier of India²⁹ and the area had significant role ‘in the everyday history and policy of the British Empire.’³⁰ The Indian Political Service and the imperial Indian Army regarded the North West Frontier the most vital region within British Raj in India. It was the only area in India which the British officers for years believed they could suffer a “knockout blow” either from internal insurrection or foreign invasion.³¹

Tribal Administration

Great Britain’s frontier policy had two objectives-one domestic, to secure the settled areas from tribal raids and attacks and to protect their life and property; the

²³ J.W. Spain, *The Way of the Pathan* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 34.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Lord Montagu of Beaulieu, ‘The North-West Frontier of India,’ *English Review*, (October 1924), pp. 589-99.

²⁶ Secret Notes on the Central Asian Question and the Coast and Frontier Defences of India 1877-1893, Memorandum on the present position in Central Asia. 13th June, 1887, pp. 105-6. L/MIL/17/14/80.

²⁷ Auckland, Colvin, ‘The Problem Beyond the Indian Frontier,’ *Nineteenth Century: A Monthly Review*, 42:250 (December, 1897), pp. 845-68.

²⁸ ‘The Future of Our N.W. Frontier,’ *Blackwoods Edinburgh Magazine*, 162:986 (December, 1897), pp. 830-33.

²⁹ ‘Little Wars on the Indian Frontier,’ *Blackwoods Edinburgh Magazine*, 157: 956 (June, 1895), p. 930.

³⁰ Lord Curzon, Text of the 1907 Romanes Lecture on the subject of FRONTIERS, . <http://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/ibru/resources/links/curzon.pdf>, (accessed February 3, 2010).

³¹ Brandon Douglas Marsh, *Ramparts of Empire: India’s North-West Frontier and British Imperialism, 1919-1947* (Austin, Tex: University of Texas, 2009), p. 2.

second-imperial, to secure the best possible position to protect India from British adversaries.³² The British Government in order to strengthen its hold on the tribes took two important decisions; first in 1893 to draw a scientific border between British India and Afghanistan; signed the famous Durand Line Agreement. Which gave “Great Britain not a single or double but a threefold Frontier: the administrative border of British India; the Durand Line, or Frontier of active protection; the Afghan border, which is the outer or advanced strategical Frontier.”³³ And secondly, a separate province was constituted in 1901 named it, the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) in order to keep a close watch on the Frontier tribes to provide the area an ‘efficient administration’, and to secure closer and more immediate supervision of the strategic area.³⁴ Regarding the creation of the new province and its sensitivity Mukulika Banerjee wrote:

From the Anglophone perspective,... nurtured in the tradition of Kipling,...it is rather natural to conceive of the North-West Frontier Province as a front line, a periphery, a point of termination. Certainly the British tried to make it such, and the very name they assigned it, drily cartographical, suggests a geographical marginality and no man’s land.³⁵

Furthermore, the British in order to control this sensitive and strategic part of India introduced a policy which was based on persuasion, pressure, and armed intervention. As part of this policy, the British created agencies³⁶ a system of indenture and interaction; different from the administrative set up of *settled areas* for dealing with the different tribes in the tribal areas. The weirdness and uniqueness and of the tribal administration was mainly attributed to its buffer-zone position and status. In J.W. Spain words:

The British tended to hold the Frontier apart from the rest of India as a unique and exclusive region, this peculiar and strange form of administration devised by the British for the Tribal areas has no parallel elsewhere. The British used the area as a training

³² Ibid., p. 1.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Sayed Wiqar Ali Shah, *North West Frontier Province: History and Politics*(Islamabad: National Institute of Historical & Cultural Research Centre of Excellence, Quaid-i- Azam University, Islamabad- Pakistan, 2007), p. xv

³⁵ Mukulika Banerjee, *The Pathan Unarmed* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2004),p. 24.

³⁶ The first Agency which the British established in 1878 was the Khyber Agency, followed by the Kurram Agency in 1892, Malakand in 1895, and by 1896 two other agencies were created namely North and South Waziristan.

ground for colonial officials and a practice area for experiments in imperial government.³⁷

The British very skillfully exercised their authority through their Political Agents, along with the inhuman judicial system known as ‘the Frontier Crimes Regulation’ backed by *Maliki* and *Jirga* mechanism. Apart from this, collective fines and retributions were imposed under the concept of ‘collective tribal territorial responsibility.’ The British put forward the excuse that the complex rules were not suited to a rude and ignorant people little familiar with written law.³⁸

Endowments and benefactions in the shape of allowances, and force, in the shape of military operations³⁹ became the apparatus of the system of recompense and punishment in the tribal areas. Moreover, the British very cleverly made the impression that the British were not against their freedom or to obstruct their day to day life. The fact was that the British wanted the economical and effective administrative arrangement that would allow them the ultimate control of the tribal areas which would not require the kind of administration that was present in the rest of British India.⁴⁰ In this regard Mukulika Banerjee stated:

In comparison with areas of India, the North West Frontier Province was heavily militarized, oppressively policed... the British, who in the classic manner of ‘divide and rule’ had sought to transform an open frontier into a closed border.⁴¹

³⁷ J.W. Spain , ‘Pakistan's North West Frontier,’ *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Winter, 1954), pp. 27-40.

³⁸ Syed Iftikhar. Hussain, *Some Major Pukhtoon Tribes along the Pak-Afghan Border*. Peshawar: Area Study Centre and Hanns Seidel Foundation, 2000), p. 5.

³⁹ These expeditions were nicknamed as butcher and blot, harry and hurry, burn and scuttle, were also known to the army as ‘Columns’ or ‘small wars’, or ‘uncomfortable wars’, to some British officers, such wars also alternatively known as tribal warfare, hill warfare, and frontier warfare, to differentiate them from interstate warfare. For some British military men such operations categorized as the staple fare of the imperial armies and the play of children, a pleasant enough way of applying peace training. A total of 51 expeditions took place between 1849 and 1914 (See T.R. Moreman, *The Army in India and the Development of Frontier Warfare, 1849-1947*. London: MacMillan Press Ltd, 1998, p. xxi).

⁴⁰ A.T. Embree, *Pakistan's Western Borderlands: The Transformation of Political Order* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1977), pp. xvi,-xvii. Furthermore, the British established a chain of fortresses, army cantonments, built strategic railway system and roads up to very remote and inaccessible areas, to challenge local insurgencies and foreign aggression, such actions shows their strategic interest in the area.

⁴¹ Mukulika Banerjee, *The Pathan Unarmed*, p. 45.

Suffice to say during the British rule, the procedures of control and administration revealed strategic interest and administrative rationalities rather than any sincere efforts to civilize, the so-called “uncivilized” Pashtun community. The British tried to achieve the subservience of the Pashtun tribes by intimidation, deception, enticement, bribery, and divide and rule policy. The British adopted the policy of ‘might is right’ and in principle it was a ‘purely military rule’⁴² based on authoritarian and authoritative administration. The British adopted such measures to advance and promote their imperial designs. Progress and development was not their concern, because the ultimate aim of the British overall frontier policy was the “security of India.”⁴³

First World War and the Defence of India

The situation on the North West Frontier of India, gave British Government of India, many anxious moments during the First World War. The British feared that the Amir of Afghanistan, Habibullah Khan, who was not happy for not being consulted over the Anglo-Russian Convention of August 1907,⁴⁴ and the events in Europe could give him an opportunity to declare a pre-emptive war against the British. An Anglo-Afghan war would provoke the Frontier tribes and involve them in a tribal conflagration and would force the Government to launch a full-fledge military operation in tribal territory, the consequences of which would be unforeseeable.⁴⁵ The situation was furthermore complicated due to internal troubles caused by increasingly militant activities of the Indian freedom fighters in Bengal, Western India and the Punjab.⁴⁶ There was the further British fear that Indian Muslims might be aroused by pan-Islamic propaganda from Turkey,⁴⁷ and by Frontier uprisings.⁴⁸ Thus, the British Government in India was faced

⁴² C. F. Andrews, *The Challenge of the North-West Frontier: A Contribution to World Peace* (London, G. Allen & Unwin 1937), p. 21.

⁴³ Teepu Mahabat Khan, *The Tribal Areas of Pakistan: A Contemporary Profile* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2008), p. 93.

⁴⁴ P. Sykes, *A History of Afghanistan II* (London: Macmillan, 1940), pp. 235-6.

⁴⁵ Lal Baha, *NW.F.P. Administration under British Rule, 1901-1919* (Islamabad: National Commission on Historical and Cultural Research, 1978), p. 81.

⁴⁶ Lord Hardinge, *My Indian Years, 1910-16* (London: 1948), pp. 116-7.

⁴⁷ “The promoters of the (Pan-Islamic) movement took advantage of the pro-Turkish feelings aroused by the Balkan Wars and the constant arrival of Indians at Constantinople,...to agree with them as to the possibility of creating serious movements against Great Britain in their own country. ... [And] that it was the intention of Indian Moslems to form secret societies under cover of religion for the purpose of sowing the seeds of Pan-Islamism as desired by the Turks. (From Sir F.A. Hietzel, KC.B Secretary , Political

with multifaceted challenges both at home and from abroad the course of the First World War.

Germany had a very clear perception about the significance of India for Great Britain and its Empire.⁴⁹ They believed that the disappearance of India from the British dominion would certainly result in the breakdown and downfall of the so-called Indian “glacis” that would reduce an enormous pressure from whole of Asia. The interest of Germany and its allies in the liberation and freedom of India was quite exceptional from commercial and political perspectives.⁵⁰ Because in German’s view ‘THE INDIAN QUESTION IS AND REMAINS A QUESTION OF POWER.’⁵¹

Having this maxim in mind the German policy makers during the First World War had spotted the potential crevice in the British imperial armor, and entered into the world of Islam with customary diligence and thoroughness. The German High Command momentarily anticipated benefiting from any “religious and political union of Islam” that might result from the Sultan of Turkey declaring *jihad* against the Allied Powers.⁵² The German’s tried to exploit the notion of Pan-Islamism, which was growing since the late nineteenth century as a dynamic force throughout the Middle East and India.

On the eve of the First World War, the Kaiser Wilhelm II wrote in one of his diplomatic report: ‘Our consuls in Turkey and India ...must inflame the whole Mohammedan world to wild revolt ...for if we are to be bled to death; at least England shall lose India.’⁵³, Bethmann Hollweg, German Chancellor also repeated the Kaiser’s view to the Foreign Office, ‘One of our chief tasks is to soften up Britain gradually by

Department, India, Office, London to The Foreign Secretary to the Government of India, 23rd November 1916, (Letters from D.C.I), *German-Indian Scheme*, Criminal Investigation Department 1916. Special Branch, Serial No. 1514, Bundle. 83, Directorate of Archives and Libraries, Peshawar, Pakistan).

⁴⁸ K.K. Aziz, *Britain and Muslim India* (London, Heinemann, 1963), pp. 84-6.

⁴⁹ Count Ernst Zu Reventlow *India: Its importance for Great Britain, Germany and the future of the World*, p. 5.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁵² Vartan, Gregorian, *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan: Politics of Reform and Modernization, 1880-1946* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1969), p. 220.

⁵³ Kris K. Manjapra, ‘The Illusions of Encounter: Muslim ‘Minds’ and Hindu Revolutionaries in First World War Germany and after’, *Journal of Global History*, vol: 1, Issue No. 03(November 2006), pp. 363-382.

harassment in India...⁵⁴ Pan-Islamic propaganda was seen by the Germans in their long-term strategy a primary and an effective military weapon to threaten the position of the Allies. On 5 August 1914, the German Chief of Staff referred to a report he had sent earlier to the ministry of foreign affairs explaining the importance of using the religion of Islam for their war time's purposes:

It is of the utmost importance to incite rebellions in India, Egypt and the Caucasus. The agreement with Turkey will give the Ministry of Foreign Affairs the opportunity of carry out this plan in so far as possible, by arousing the fanaticism of the world of Islam.⁵⁵

Germany wanted to use the notion of Islam to its cause with the help of the Ottoman Empire. Kaiser and his warmongering advisors intended to drive out the British from India and the Czarist Russia from Central Asia and the Caucasus by unleashing *Jihad* or holy war against the Triple Entente.⁵⁶ Wilhelm II was assured by his counselors and advisors that India was like a powder keg of dissatisfaction and frustration and required only the torch of revolution to burst into flames.⁵⁷ They believed that if the disillusioned and disenchanted elements in India were convinced to rise against the British Raj then the British would find themselves in a very precarious situation.⁵⁸ In this regard Count Ernst Zu Reventlow argued:

The outbreak of serious unrest in India, or even an admission that such exists and that an insurrection which cannot be suppressed, is being hatched in India would shake the prestige of Great Britain to its foundations, both in Asia and in the whole world. The British know well the meaning of the word prestige and they also know that the recognition of their power in Asia, or of at least three-quarters of it, depends on this very prestige.⁵⁹

Three months after the commencement of the war, Turkish Empire joined the war against the Allied powers. The German's with the co-operation and collaboration of the Sultan of Turkey planned various groups of political missionaries, consisted of Turkish, Germans

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Touraj Atabaki, *Iran and the First World War: battleground of the great powers* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006), p. 31.

⁵⁶ Peter Hopkirk, *On Secret Service East of Constantinople* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 2.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 1.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 3.

⁵⁹ Reventlow, *India: Its importance for Great Britain, Germany and the future of the World*, p. 64.

and Indian members, who would visit Persia [Iran], Afghanistan and the Arab world stirring up anti-British feelings and propaganda for holy war.⁶⁰ Enver Pasha, Turkey's War Minister highlighted this point in these words:

we call the whole world of Islam to rise up in arms.... We will send our most resourceful men to strike the Allies' interests wherever it will be. In this way we will cause, India, Baluchistan, Afghanistan, Persia, and all Africa to rise up against the Allies enemy. The world of Islam will soon come under the command of the Caliph.⁶¹

After the Turkish entering the war the conflict thus assumed a new complexity as far as the emotions of the Muslims were concerned. The Turkish Empire was looked upon by many Muslim as an emblem of unity, strength and status and their participation in the war aroused Pan-Islamic and pro-Turkish sentiments not only among the Indian Muslims but particularly amongst Pashtun community of tribal belt of the North-West Frontier Province. Roos-Keppel, The Chief Commissioner of the Province underlined his apprehensions by saying that “the contingency had to be faced that war with Turkey might unfavourably affect the situation, might chill the warmth of the popular good-will, and create a dangerous sympathy with future trans- frontier attacks launched against us in the name of religion”.⁶²

Afghanistan: The Hub of International Intrigues

The modern history of Afghanistan is the ‘history of conflict--of invasions, battles and sieges, of vendettas, assassinations and massacres, of tribal feuding, dynastic strife and civil war’.⁶³ Afghanistan, due to its strategic position was dragged into the sphere of international politics. For the British, Afghanistan was like a *cordon sanitaire*; a bulwark

⁶⁰ Manjapra, The illusions of encounter: Muslim ‘minds’ and Hindu revolutionaries in First World War Germany and after, *Journal of Global History*. The Turkish press for the sake of propaganda published a picture of the Kaiser in which the latter wore Arab dress and was dubbed “Haji Wilhelm.” (Abdullah Khan, *Mawlana Ubayd Allah Sindhi's Mission to Afghanistan and Soviet Russia* (Islamabad: Area Study Centre (Russia & Central Asia) & Hanns Seidal Foundation, 1998, p. 41).

⁶¹ Atabaki, *Iran and the First World War: battleground of the great powers*, p. 29.

⁶² The Chief Commissioner, Roos Keppel, to the Foreign Secretary to the Government of India, dated 15th June 1915, cited by Abdul Rauf in ‘Pan –Islamism and The North West Frontier Province of British India (1897-1918)’, *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs* 12 (2007), pp. 21-42.

⁶³ Martin Ewans, *Afghanistan, A Short History of Its People and Politics* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), p. 12.

and a first line of defence against the foreign encroachments towards the North-West Frontier of India. Throughout the Great Game, Russia and Great Britain with their diplomatic squabbling's tried to influence Afghanistan. British interest in Afghanistan was founded on the compulsion and obligation to maintain and consolidate her imperial position and hold in India. In order to fulfil its objectives Afghanistan was twice invaded during the 19th century, its borders were redefined; the country was made a buffer state as part of British 'ring fence strategy' to protect its interest in the region. Lord Curzon gave a very critical analysis of the Anglo-Afghan relation. He argued:

For fifty years there has not been an Afghan Amir whom we have not alternately fought against and caressed, now repudiating and now recognising his sovereignty, now appealing to his subjects as their saviours, now slaughtering them as our foes...Each one of these men has known the British both as enemies and as patrons, and has commonly only won the patronage by the demonstration of his power to command it. Small wonder that we have never been trusted by the Afghan rulers, or liked by the Afghan people!...Afghanistan has long been the Achilles' heel of Great Britain in the East. Impregnable elsewhere, she has shown herself uniformly vulnerable here.⁶⁴

During the First World War, the neutrality of Afghanistan was once more of immense importance for the defence and protection of British Raj in India. Lord Hardinge, the Viceroy of India realizing the gravity of situation quickly informed Amir Habibullah, about the outbreak of the war, asked him to preserve neutrality during the war and requested him to take extraordinary steps to maintain order and calm on the Indo-Afghan border. To the much relief of the Viceroy, the Amir assured him of his neutrality, and repeated in November 1914 when Ottoman Empire entered the conflict.⁶⁵

Amir Habibullah throughout the war remained true to his pledge, although it was not an easy job. Nasrullah Khan, his younger brother, who led a pro-Turkish and anti-British bloc at Kabul, supported by religious and extremist elements made no secret of their disapproval to the neutral policy of the Amir. They applied great pressure on him to declare a war against the British in favour of Turkey.⁶⁶ The situation became further complicated and more difficult for the Amir when a Turco-German mission, headed by

⁶⁴ G.N. Curzon, *Russia in Central Asia* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 356.

⁶⁵ Baha, *N.W.F.P. Administration under British Rule, 1901-1919*, p. 82.

⁶⁶ L.W. Adamec, *Afghanistan, 1900-1923: A Diplomatic History* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), p. 90.

Captain Oskar von Niedermayer and Kazim Bey,⁶⁷ arrived at Kabul in August 1915 along with the letters from the Sultan⁶⁸ and Kaiser for him.⁶⁹ In addition to this, the Indian freedom fighter (called seditionists by the British) with the anti-British elements at Kabul added more pressure on him. There were rumors of revolt against him, and even of his murder.⁷⁰

The Turco-German mission tried through religious endeavours, moral pressure, promises of military and financial assistance, to persuade the Amir to enter the war and back an Indian uprising.⁷¹ The Germans and Turks hoped that if Habibullah was convinced, he could cause a major revolt in the Pashtun belt on the Indian border.⁷² William Barton in this context, remarks, “Had the Amir preached a holy war against the infidel there can be little doubt that the whole borderland would have answered the call”.⁷³ Whereas Mohammad Ali Qasuri, who himself was a participant viewed that if Amir would declare war, the history of not only India but of the whole Islamic World ‘would have been written differently.’⁷⁴

But Habibullah meticulously handled the situation: he received the Turco-German mission with great respect but kept it guessing about his intents and plan; He told the delegation politely “I am a lone man and fearsome of the British and the Russian allies between the upper and the nether millstone. ... I wait the Turkish armies on their way to India, and I shall be ready to lead the hosts of Islam by their side. *Ya Ali!*”⁷⁵

⁶⁷ The mission consisted of eighty men, along with few leading Indian revolutionaries, including Mohendra Pratap, Barkatullah and Obaid ullah Sindhi.

⁶⁸ The Sultan of Turkey, asked the Amir to proclaim a crusade against the imperialists and not to refrain from announcing a Holy War (Jihad) against Britain and instigating the frontier tribes against (British) India (see Zahid Anwar, ‘Indian Freedom Fighters in Central Asia (1914-1939)’, J.R.S.P., Vol. 45, No. 2, 2008), pp. 147-58.

⁶⁹ Atabaki, *Iran and the First World War: battleground of the great powers*, p. 31.

⁷⁰ Baha, *NW.F.P. Administration under British Rule, 1901-1919*, p. 82. See also Louis Dupree *Afghanistan*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968, pp. 434-5)

⁷¹ Roger Chickering, *Imperial Germany and the Great War, 1914–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 112.

⁷² Gregorian, *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan: Politics of Reform and Modernization, 1880-1946*, p. 221.

⁷³ Sir William Barton, *India's North-West Frontier* (London: John Murray, 1939), p. 75.

⁷⁴ Rauf, ‘*Pan –Islamism and The North West Frontier Province of British India (1897-1918)*’

⁷⁵ Sir George MacMunn, *Afghanistan From Darius To Amanullah* (Lahore: Sang-e- Meel Publications, 2002), p. 256.

He listened to the arguments and the advice of the war-party in his court but never acted on it. He told them “it would be the height of folly for the Afghans to throw in their lot with Turkey, when Russia and Britain were in alliance, and might combine to crush Afghanistan.”⁷⁶

Furthermore, Habibullah managed to a great extent to contain his subjects from transgressions in British territory, criticized and scolded the most powerful and influential Afghan mullahs for encouraging and guiding such raids, and even discouraged the tribes on the other side of the Durand Line from hostility towards the British.⁷⁷

The Amir's role was of great political significance, for it facilitated in controlling the situation on the frontier. The Home Government and the Viceroy Hardinge were confident in Amir's good faith, and as a result in September 1915, the Government of India increased his subsidy by two lakhs of rupees and George V sent the Amir a letter of thanks.⁷⁸ Appreciating the diplomatic skills of Amir Habibullah, Vartan Gregorian writes:

The Amir's policy of benevolent neutrality toward the British was motivated primarily by political and economic considerations. Entry into the war would have exposed Afghanistan to a combined Anglo-Russia attack. Not only was the country too weak to withstand such an attack militarily, it was too weak economically and, moreover, depended largely on trade conducted through India and Russia.⁷⁹

There were other reasons as well. Pan-Islamism had not yet demonstrated to be a global Islamic political movement which could galvanize and stimulate the Muslim world. Instead, the Arabs which had revolted against the Ottoman Empire were a great psychological blow and the followers of Shia Islam also did not recognise the Ottoman Caliph, like the rest of the Sunni Islam.

⁷⁶ Barton, *India's North-West Frontier*, p. 141.

⁷⁷ The British government in India watched the activities of the mission with great concern and considered it a grave and serious threat - so much so that they tried to intercept the travellers in Persia, en route from Istanbul to Kabul and consequently deployed their own intelligence and diplomatic strategies to ensure that Afghanistan would retain its neutral position.

⁷⁸ Baha, *N.W.F.P. Administration under British Rule, 1901-1919*, p. 83.

⁷⁹ Gregorian, *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan: Politics of Reform and Modernization, 1880-1946*, p. 222.

Habibullah renewed his assurances to Great Britain of his continued friendship, and in January 1916, again declared his neutrality in uncompromising terms at a public durbar.⁸⁰ He wrote to King George V, ‘I can assure you that we will remain neutral and keep our pledge to the last’⁸¹ and at the same time managed to conclude a tentative treaty with German, making Afghan participation in the war contingent upon the arrival of a large military force, huge supplies of armaments, and sizable amount of gold.⁸²

In the same year British and Russian military successes in southern Persia and eastern Turkey respectively, no doubt reduced whatsoever interest the Amir may have had for the cause of the Central Powers. The fall of Kut al Amarah in February in 1917 and the withdrawal of Turkish forces from Persia in the same year ended all Turko-German hope of success in Persia and Afghanistan.⁸³

After months of frustrating negotiations it became clear that despite promises of money, military hardware and territorial gains, Habibullah was not prepared to put at risk his profitable relationship with British.⁸⁴ To forestall the complete failure of the mission there was even talk of staging a palace coup.⁸⁵ However, most of the members of the Niedermayer mission left Kabul on May 22, 1916 characterizing the Amir of Afghanistan with such words as “hare-brained”, “fanciful”, and preposterous”.⁸⁶ The mission had failed in its immediate object,⁸⁷ although succeeded to establish contact with a number of revolutionaries within India and with the border tribes.⁸⁸ Elaborating the significance of the German mission to Afghanistan Peter Hopkirk wrote:

⁸⁰ Martin Ewans, *Afghanistan: A New History* (London: Curzon Press, 2001), p. 84.

⁸¹ Raja Anwar, *The Tragedy of Afghanistan: A first Hand Account* (London: Vergo, 1988), p. 18.

⁸² Sykes, *A History of Afghanistan II*, pp. 257-58. According to Adamec the treaty provided for assistance in the amount of 20 million pounds in gold as well as 50, 000 artillery pieces, hundred thousand rifles and an enormous amount of ammunition. (See L. W. Adamec, *Afghanistan, 1900-1923: A Diplomatic History*. University of California Press, 1967, p. 179).

⁸³ Sykes, *A History of Afghanistan II*, p. 256.

⁸⁴ Ewans, *Afghanistan: A New History*, p. 84.

⁸⁵ Sykes, *A History of Afghanistan II*, p. 95.

⁸⁶ Chickering, *Imperial Germany and the Great War, 1914–1918*, p. 112.

⁸⁷ Gregorian, *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan: Politics of Reform and Modernization, 1880-1946*, p. 223.

⁸⁸ Musa Khan Jalalzai, *The Foreign Policy of Afghanistan* (Lahore: Sang-e- Meel Publications, 2003), p. 65.

Had they succeeded in unleashing the full fury of the Amir's forces against the British in India, they might well have changed the course of the war. Indeed, their names, like that of Lawrence, might have been remembered to this day. As it was, they had suffered great hardship and faced innumerable perils, only to see it all collapse in failure.⁸⁹

British Secretary of State for war Lord Kitchener estimated that if the Mission would have succeeded in convincing the Amir to attack India, Great Britain would have to divert more than 135,000 men from other parts of war to defend successfully the sub-continent.⁹⁰ In J.W. Adamec opinion:

The German mission to Afghanistan was successful in so far as it accomplished some of its objectives: it disturbed Russia and Britain greatly with its activities, and it carried hostile propaganda into an area hitherto, the exclusive concern of those two European powers. The expedition comes with more than a message and it nearly succeeded in involving Afghanistan in the war.⁹¹

Habibullah remained resolute to his policy of neutrality and the outcome of the war justified his stance. There was a general belief among a good number of people in Afghanistan that he had let down her Islamic values and had failed to grab the opportunity to become fully independent that was possible especially after the Russian Revolution of 1917.⁹² 'But intrigue or no intrigue' argued George MacMunn, 'Habibullah kept the peace, and the world War came to an end without Afghanistan being numbered among the combatants.'⁹³

Turkish Activities in the Tribal Belt

Although the Turco-German Mission met with failure in Kabul, it succeeded in establishing contact with a number of revolutionaries within India and with the border

⁸⁹ Jules Stewart , *The Kaiser's Mission to Kabul: A Secret Expedition to Afghanistan in World War I* (I.B Tauris & Co Ltd, 2014), pp. xv-xvi.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. x.

⁹¹ Adamec, *Afghanistan, 1900-1923: A Diplomatic History*, p. 96 The British Government was also apprehensive about the non-European members of the mission. The Muslim members could appeal to Afghans on the basis of Islamic solidarity. They also spoke the local languages and could have a more intimate contact with the people and be much more effective with the frontier tribes. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁹² Ewans, *Afghanistan: A New History*, p. 84.

⁹³ MacMunn, *Afghanistan From Darius To Amanullah*, p. 257.

tribes.⁹⁴ In June 1916 two delegates were sent; one was led by Turkish colonel Khired Bey, and the other was Mohammad Abid.⁹⁵ The mission managed to establish a centre for the anti-British activities in Tirah (an area in the Khyber), in the tribal belt. A British agent in Kabul also reported that some of the members of the mission had been sent to visit Mohmand and Wazir areas in the tribal belt.⁹⁶ Turkish agents were also busy in Bajaur and the Mahsud country.⁹⁷ Roos-Keppel, the Chief Commissioner of North-West Frontier Province reported in July 1916, that “besides the parties sent to Terah and Bajaur, other parties [of Turks] with escorts of Afridi deserters have gone to the Mahsud border and to the neighbor –hood of Chaman.”⁹⁸

Before the arrival of the Turkish emissaries, one of their agents, Mir Mast, a Kamber Khel Afridi had already been intriguing and exciting the Afridis.⁹⁹ On their arrival the Turkish emissaries delivered anti-British speeches and showed a flag, to be sent by the Turkish Sultan¹⁰⁰ and asked the Afridis for their support against the British. They also promised to supply arms, ammunition and money. Their stay and propaganda in Tirah had some success, many deserters or dismissed Pashtun soldiers, mainly, pro-Afghan Afridis from the British Imperial Indian army joined ranks and later formed what they called “Turkish army” and sometimes the “Amir's army” and the number of Afridi recruits enlisted in that army had reached 400 by July 1916.¹⁰¹

Roos-Keppel through his local agents kept close surveillance of the Turkish activities. He acknowledged that Turkish agents had created a split in the Afridi tribe: one pro-British and the other pro-Turkish. The Chief Commissioner initially did not take any action against them and their Afridi supporters for what he called it “a very delicate equilibrium” in the tribe, and more importantly he was against creating any strain

⁹⁴ Musa Khan Jalalzai, *The Foreign Policy of Afghanistan* (Lahore: Sang-e- Meel Publications, 2003), p. 65.

⁹⁵ An Arab, formerly employed by the Turks as a drill instructor in Kabul.

⁹⁶ Adamec, *Afghanistan, 1900-1923: A Diplomatic History*, p. 97.

⁹⁷ Baha, *NW.F.P. Administration under British Rule, 1901-1919*, p. 94.

⁹⁸ Adamec, *Afghanistan, 1900-1923: A Diplomatic History*, p. 98.

⁹⁹ Mir Mast served in the British 58th Rifles Regiment, from which had deserted in France and then accompanied the Turco-German mission to Kabul.

¹⁰⁰ Syed Waqar Ali Shah, *German Activities in NWFP (1914-45)*,

http://www.khyber.org/history/a/german_activities_in_nwfp_1914.shtml, (accessed June 12, 2014).

¹⁰¹ Baha, *NW.F.P. Administration under British Rule, 1901-1919*, p. 94.

relations between Afghanistan and the British and therefore, thought it better to “leave the Turks alone”.¹⁰²

But things changed when in September 1916 under pressure from the British officers in the Khyber, the pro-British Afridis told the Turks that unless and until they would not see the united armies of Germany, Afghanistan, and Turkey with their own eyes on the Indian frontiers they [Afridis] would neither rise or create any problem to the British in the tribal areas.¹⁰³ Moreover, they informed the Turks that they should not expect any help from the Afridis unless the Amir of Afghanistan would not declare *Jihad* and they also demanded huge amount of money and arms.¹⁰⁴ The British also won some mullahs at their side which helped them to check anti-British activities in the area.¹⁰⁵ By September 1916 the pro-British faction of the Afridis managed to drive out the Turkish emissaries from Tirah to Rajgal near the Afghan border where they remained for the next six months before ousting them completely from the area with the help of tribal *lashkar* (a tribal force) under the command of Malik Zaman Khan, an influential pro-British Afridi elder.¹⁰⁶ In June 1917, the Turks were reported to have finally left the tribal territory and crossed over to Afghanistan. Turkish conspiracies and intrigues continued also in Mohmand and Bajaur, but as a whole the Turks failed in their mission to stir a tribal rising against the British during the war period. The British rewarded the tribes by sanctioning a bonus of one year’s allowances.¹⁰⁷

Activities of Various Groups in the Tribal Belt

To maintain peace with the tribes in the tribal belt became more difficult and problematic during the war by the presence of different groups both from India and from abroad. The area provided both a sanctuary and a base of operations for these groups. The groups included the Mujahidin (holy warriors), called by the British the “Hindustani

¹⁰² Lal Baha, ‘The North-West frontier in the first World War,’ *Asian Affairs*, vol: 1, Issue 1, (1970), pp. 29-37.

¹⁰³ Shah, *German Activities in NWFP (1914-45)*

¹⁰⁴ Baha, ‘The North-West frontier in the first World War’

¹⁰⁵ Shah, *German Activities in NWFP (1914-45)*

¹⁰⁶ Baha, ‘The North-West frontier in the first World War’

¹⁰⁷ The Border Administration Report of the North-West Frontier Province for the year 1917-18, p.3, Directorate of Archives and Libraries, Peshawar, Pakistan.

Fanatics”,¹⁰⁸ the Indian revolutionaries termed as the “seditionists”,¹⁰⁹ Haji Sahib of Turangzai, a prominent religious leader and the Turkish agents. With the commencement of the war the Hindustani Fanatics, realizing the British multifaceted problem in the war stepped up their activities by making Sittana in Buner and Chamarkand in Bajour as their bases which became the centre of unrest in the tribal territory. The Hindustani Fanatics organized many attacks from tribal territory against British positions. In April 1915 they attacked the village of Rustam on the Peshawar border. The Government responded by blockading their areas. They were involved in another attack when they coordinated with Swatis in August attacking the British in Landakai Spur. The Hindustani Fanatics under the leadership of Mawlana Bashir were very active in Tirah and set up a colony at Sarkash, a Kuki Khel village in Tirah. During the year 1916 they were also involved in the rising in the tribal area of Mohmand.¹¹⁰

In August 1916, a well-known conspiracy plan the ‘Silk Letter Case’ came to light. The conspirators aimed at “overthrowing British rule by an attack on the North West Frontier supplemented by a Muslim rising in India”. It was found that the Hindustani Fanatics were “an integral part of the whole conspiracy”. Consequently, the British took strong measures for the interception of men and money to the movement.¹¹¹ The Hindustani Fanatics were supported by the freedom fighters from the Far East, Panjab, Kabul, by German agents and other anti-British elements. Roos-Keppel, therefore, emphasized that the government efforts “to break up the organization in India... should not be relaxed”.¹¹² The British considered Chamarkand as a dangerous place of

¹⁰⁸ Founded by Syed Ahmed Shah of Bareilly early in the nineteenth century

¹⁰⁹ They were small but well-organised group of Hindus Sikhs and Muslims, whose aim was to overthrow the British Government in India by violent means. The outbreak of war in Europe offered a great opportunity to members of the Indian Revolutionary Party to further their designs by enlisting the aid of Germany. The composition of Indian Revolutionary Party included the Berlin Group, Paris group, Egyptian Party, Indians in England, International Anarchists in Switzerland, supporters in America, and Dutch East Indian and the Far East Party. They took their models from Europe and looked for support there as well as in India. They saw in the war an opportunity to stir up trouble by appealing to the “ignorance and fanaticism” of the frontier tribes.

(German-Indian Scheme: Secret: Extract from the Weekly Report of the Director, Criminal Intelligence, Dated 11th April 1916. Criminal Investigation Department 1916. No. 83. Letters from D.C.I. Special Branch Serial No. 1514, Bundle No. 83, Directorate of Archives and Libraries, Peshawar, Pakistan).

¹¹⁰ Lal Baha, ‘The Activities of the Mujahidin 1900-1936,’ *Islamic Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Summer 1979), pp. 97-168.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

‘subversive forces of revolution’, and of ‘fanaticism’ of ‘anarchy’ on the North-West Frontier and the government must go for its “total extinction.”¹¹³

The British used both force and reconciliation policy. The British were involved in secret talks with the leader of the movement Niamatullah Khan to convince him about their futile efforts. After four months of negotiations, in which Abdul Qaiyum acted as intermediary, an understanding was reached. The treaty between Amir Niamatullah, and the Frontier authorities was signed on 5th December 1917, the Government sanctioned Niamatullah certain allowances on condition that he kept his men away from anti-British elements in the tribal territory. The subsequent agreement was a sign of relief for the British authority and it helped them to concentrate against other anti-British elements like Haji Sahib of Turangzai.¹¹⁴

For the British Government the most important individual who crossed over to tribal areas at the end of April 1915 was Fadl-i Wahid, popularly known as the Haji Sahib of Turangzai His coming to the tribal areas came as a “great surprise” to Roos-Keppel. According to Roos-Keppel, he was persuaded by Mawlawi Saifur Rahman, a terminated school master from Delhi, to go to the tribal areas and raise the standard of revolt and *Jihad*.¹¹⁵ Roos-Keppel tried to persuade him through his friends and many leading Khans of the Peshawar district but in vain. By the end of July 1915, it was reported that the Haji Sahib was “in active communication with most of the Mullah’s on the Northern Frontier”.¹¹⁶ Travelling to Buner to the famous shrine of Pir Baba, Haji Sahib was received with ‘acclamation’ by the people of Buner, Swat. The Hindustani Fanatics also welcomed him. Haji Turangzai was perhaps the most respected and reliable person in the tribal territory, he was quite influence in the Peshawar district and in tribal border where he enjoyed a status of purity and selfless compassion.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ See Altaf Qadir, ‘Anti-Colonial Movement: The Struggle of the Haji Sahib Turangzai to do away with the authority of the British Raj,’ *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society*, Karachi (April-June, 2008), Vol. LVI, No. 2. pp. 111-123.

¹¹⁵ Roos-Keppel to Hardinge, 25 August 1915 cited by Lal Baha in ‘The Activities of the Mujahidin 1900-1936’.

¹¹⁶ Baha, *NW.F.P. Administration under British Rule, 1901-1919*, p. 98.

Haji Turangzai occasionally visited Mohmands, Bajauris and Swatis, to preach holy war. In June 1915 with a lashkar of 4,000 strong he invaded British territory on the north-eastern border of Peshawar. In a secret telegraph, it was noted that if “Haji [Turangzai] has any success however, small a strong religious movement will be set on foot and the flame may spread to other tribes...”¹¹⁷ The Babra Mulla of Bajaur led a 10,000 strong tribal lashkar against Shabqadar in September, 1915, and 3,000 in October, 1915.¹¹⁸

In another encounter at Rustam border, on August 17, 1915, the British engaged several thousand tribesmen.¹¹⁹ The British tried to limit his activities and should not succeed to inflame the whole tribal belt. Haji Sahib roamed around Swat, Bajaur and finally settled in the Mohmand country. His religio-spiritual status made him to raise the standard of revolt against the British in Mohmand many time. British troops were hurried again and again to Shabqadar, at the main approach to Mohmand territory to encounter Haji Sahib and his followers.¹²⁰ The British on 15 November 1916 used airpower for the first time against the Mohmand tribes.¹²¹ The Government made peace with the Mohmands because of troubles with the Mahsud tribes and the blockade against the Mohmand was lifted in July 1917.

The condition on the border greatly improved in 1917 as compared to the previous two years. At the end of the 1917 the lower Mohmand tribes were the only source of trouble. Effective steps taken by the British ‘resulted in the departure of the Haji Sahib of Turangzai from Buner.’¹²² ‘The wild rumpurs’ writes Major J.A. Brett ‘which seemed likely to cause a general rising along the border ... have been largely discredited and most of tribes seem at the moment of writing to have a genuine desire to

¹¹⁷ From H. Wheeler Secretary to the Government of India to J.E. Donald, Chief Commissioner and Agent to the Governor General. Deputy, Secret Telegraph, dated 15th August 1915, Disturbances on the Frontier 1914-15, Commissioner Office Peshawar, Serial No. 217, Bundle No. 12, Directorate of Archives and Libraries, Peshawar, Pakistan.

¹¹⁸ Muahmmad Fahim Khan, ‘The Life and Times of Hajji Sahib of Turanzai,’ *Islamic Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Spring 1977), pp. 329-341.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Baha, *NW.F.P. Administration under British Rule, 1901-1919*, p. 99.

¹²² From Major J.A. Brett, I.A., Assistant Commissioner, Mardan to Deputy Commissioner, Peshawar. No. 805, dated 6th April 1917. Confidential: political Border Administration Report -1916-17, Serial No. 149, Bundle No. 9. p. 2, Directorate of Archives and Libraries, Peshawar, Pakistan.

live at peace'.¹²³ The confidential Political Border Administration Report -1916-17 mentioned:

All mullahs have lost credit and the treatment accorded to the Haji of Turangzai during the summer of 1916 is a fair indication of their universal unpopularity in the tribe. This marked loss of credit by the mullahs is attributable to (1) The trouble and loss caused to the tribe by their intrigue in 1915 (2) The Amir's open condemnation of their propaganda and (3) the disappointment of general tribal expectations which were raised at the commencement of the war in Europe in regard to the attentions of the Turks to invade India from the North, the reputed conversion of the Germans to Islam etc. The wildest rumours were current at the commencement of the war, but the tribes are now better informed and the prognostications of the Mullahs have been falsified by our success in Egypt, Mesopotamia etc.¹²⁴

Haji Turangzai was not only supported by the Hindustani Fanatics against the British but he also established contact with the anti- British party at Kabul and set up a press from which he published jihad pamphlets.¹²⁵ Haji Sahib did create problems for the British during the war period but failed to form a united stance against the British.¹²⁶

British Counter Measures

When the war started British Government in India maintained a "watchful policy" towards the tribes.¹²⁷ At the beginning of the war the aim was to watch the Mohmands and the Mahsuds, both of whom were restless. Fortunately, for the British the tribes of Swat and the Khyber Agency, Waziris of Tochi; Bhattanis of Jandola, offered their services and support to the British. The North Waziristan Militia and the Khyber Rifles also offered contingents for active service.¹²⁸

¹²³ Ibid., p. 20.

¹²⁴ Confidential: political Border Administration Report -1916-17. Deputy Commissioner Peshawar, Serial No. 149. Bundle, No. 9. p. 25, Directorate of Archives and Libraries, Peshawar, Pakistan.

¹²⁵ Baha, *NW.F.P. Administration under British Rule, 1901-1919*, p. 99.

¹²⁶ Another contributor to the uneasiness in the Pashtun hills was a group of Muslim students from India, principally from the Deoband College in the United Provinces. These men maintain close connections with the Indian independence movement that had been developing in the United States. Though they had been observed and infiltrated by the efficient British secret police in 1915, some managed to escape across the border to take refuge in Kabul or among the Mujahidin, where they continued their intrigues. (See Fletcher, *Afghanistan: Highway to Conquest*, p.180).

¹²⁷ Baha, *NW.F.P. Administration under British Rule, 1901-1919*, p. 83. In August 1914 three divisions of infantry and a cavalry brigade were maintained on the frontier on a 'mobilised footing', with three other frontier brigades at Kohat, Bannu and Derajat. Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

As the war proceeded, the strategic spectrum of the area had become more wearisome as the vagaries of a World War played itself out on the Frontier, demonstrating the intricacy of the situation that confronted the British in the Frontier.¹²⁹ The uneasy calm on the frontier was threatened in November 1914 by Turkey's entry into the war and put the British administration in dilemma. In a telegram sent by Viceroy to the Secretary of State informing him that war with Turkey had been 'greatly affecting the trans-frontier Pathans'.¹³⁰

The British War with Turkey provided an opportunity to the mullahs in the tribal areas encouraged and supported by the mullahs of southern Afghanistan to motivate the tribesmen to *jihād*.¹³¹ The stories of Turkish victories and a cohesive move by Turkey and Afghanistan to invade British India were also common in the region.¹³²

The war with Turkey created another problem most notably desertion of tribesmen from military service.¹³³ The propaganda that Afghanistan and Turkey would soon join against the British Empire had its effect on tribal recruits, especially the Afridis. In such an event, 'the families of the Afridis serving in the British Army would be regarded as having aided the 'infidel'.¹³⁴ As a consequence, desertions increased and by mid-1915 it has reached to nearly 10 percent among the Afridis.¹³⁵ The situation became so serious that in November 1915 all recruitment of trans-border Pashtuns was stopped and the total number of the Pashtun soldiers in British imperial Indian Army was less than 1,800 by the end of 1918.¹³⁶ To counter this situation the Government of India, was forced to resort both politically and militarily. The attitude of the Afridis, "the keystone

¹²⁹ Christian Tripodi, *Edge of Empire: The British Political Officer and Tribal Administration on the North-West Frontier 1877-1947* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011), p. 115.

¹³⁰ Baha, 'The North-West frontier in the first World War'

¹³¹ Indian Army units were despatched to Mesopotamia and other theatres of war in the Middle East. As a result, for several weeks in 1915 the number of troops for the maintenance of internal security in India fell dangerously below the safety level, the total British garrison in India being less than 15,000 men. The mutiny of the 130th Baluch Regiment and the suspected disaffection of other Indian troops added to the Government's worries.

¹³² Lal Baha, 'The Trans-Frontier Pathan Soldiers and The First World War,' *Islamic Studies*, vol. 25, No. 4 (Winter 1986), pp. 387-93.

¹³³ David Omessi, *The Sepoy and the Raj: The Indian Army, 1860-1940* (London: MacMillan Press, 1994), p. 20.

¹³⁴ Tripodi, *Edge of Empire: The British Political Officer and Tribal Administration on the North-West Frontier 1877-1947*, p. 115.

¹³⁵ Omessi, *The Sepoy and the Raj: The Indian Army, 1860-1940*, p. 20.

¹³⁶ Baha, 'The Trans-Frontier Pathan Soldiers and The First World War'

of the frontier arch”, was of great significance. Roos-Keppel, in highlighting this point stated:

In the Muhammadan crisis, which there is reason to believe is approaching rapidly, their [Afridi] friendship will be of incalculable value. So long as we hold Afridis, who can form a fireproof curtain between northern and southern Islam on this frontier, no Jihad or rising can be general.¹³⁷

He further said that the Orakzais and Mohmands, tribes, were keenly watching the Afridi’s response. He therefore requested the Government to increase the allowances of Afridis for their loyalty and good conduct. The Home Government accepted and doubled the allowances, agreeing that the “wisdom of this concession at the present time can hardly be disputed”.¹³⁸ On 13 February 1915 in the Victoria Memorial Hall, Peshawar, Roos- Keppel announced the grant of increased allowances in a gathering of 3000 tribal elders and he hoped that “the maliks, the elders and the tribe as a whole will be with us and that nothing but a general upheaval of the Islamic World, including Afghanistan, will shake the Afridis”.¹³⁹ According to Christian Tripodi:

Afridi and Turks, aside Roos-Keppel’s main priorities as the war progressed centred on effective administration within tribal agencies, the amelioration of wider tribal antipathy, and the cultivation of effective intelligence with regard to Afghanistan particularly the burgeoning German influence in the country.¹⁴⁰

At the same time, military measures were taken purely on defensive line. This policy, as Roos-Keppel elaborated was ‘to keep on as good terms as possible with the tribes who are behaving well, freely to use force in crushing any incipient outbreak’.¹⁴¹ In November 1915 Roos-Keppel informed Hardinge:

It is a merciful dispensation of Providence that these tribes can never combine, short as we are of troops at present, we should be hard put to it were several of the bigger tribes to

¹³⁷ Roos-Keppel to Secretary Government of India, cited in Lal Baha, ‘The Trans-Frontier Pathan Soldiers and The First World War’

¹³⁸ Viceroy to Secretary of State cited in Lal Baha, ‘The North-West frontier in the first World War,’

¹³⁹ Baha, *NW.F.P. Administration under British Rule, 1901-1919*, p. 85.

¹⁴⁰ Tripodi, *Edge of Empire: The British Political Officer and Tribal Administration on the North-West Frontier 1877-1947*, p. 116.

¹⁴¹ Baha, *NW.F.P. Administration under British Rule, 1901-1919*, p. 86.

rise simultaneously- but they always give us time to settle one lot before taking on the next.¹⁴²

Meanwhile, the diplomatic activities in Kabul by anti-British elements greatly perturbed the Commissioner of North-West Frontier Province. In January, 1916, a seemingly fictitious letter supposedly signed up by the Amir Habiullah, Nasrullah, and others was addressed to the qazis, mullahs and tribal elders of the Tirah was circulated on the frontier. It read:

We are much pleased with you and you should prepare yourself for holy war which will, if God pleases, take place in summer next. You should completely prepare yourself we will supply you with rifles, as many as you required. You should make each and every man firm to take up this enterprise and fortify each and every place.¹⁴³

Stories of Kaiser's plans to invade Persia, Afghanistan and Egypt got much attention in the tribal areas. The Germans and the Turks also made an attempt to win over the Pashtuns, Sikh, and the Baluchi soldiers of the Indian army, who were active in Mesopotamia [Iraq], Palestine, Egypt, East Africa, Burma, Singapore and France. They tried to influence the Pashtuns and the Baluchis through Pan-Islamism and the Sikhs through the Ghadr party, but they had little success.¹⁴⁴

Apart from this a revolutionary Government which was formed in exile at Kabul calling itself the 'Provisional Government of India' believed that once the people of the tribal areas rose against the British imperialist, they hoped it would have its aftershock in

¹⁴² Baha, 'The North-West frontier in the first World War'.

¹⁴³ Adamec, *Afghanistan, 1900-1923: A Diplomatic History*, p. 97.

¹⁴⁴ Sir George Macmunn, *The Martial Races of India* (Quetta: Gosha-e-Adab: Sole distributors, Nisa Traders, 1977), p. 245. Roos-Keppel was informed that the German tried to preach 'sedition to Indian prisoners in Germany and, if possible, to Indian troops in France.' The report further said that 'an interesting photograph taken from one of the German illustrated papers showing a visit paid by oriental visitors to the Indian soldiers' camp at Doberitz. Among these visitors can be recognized Chempakaraman Pillai, Sheikh Shawish, and two Indian Muhammadans, Abdur Rahman Sindi, and Abdul Sattar (see Secret: Foreign and Political Department Simla, 1 October 1915. To lieutenant-Colonel Sir George Roos-Keppel, KCSI, KCIE Chief Commissioner and Agent to the Governor-General in the NWFP, German- Indian Schemes in Europe, German Indian Scheme: Secret : List of persons connected with the German-Indian Scheme. (Letters from the D.C.I.) Period 1915 Serial No.1513, Bundle No. 83.)

the whole country.¹⁴⁵ Roos-Keppel was apprehensive that Amir of Afghanistan was showing signs of wavering due to pressure from Nasrullah and his men as regard to his neutral policy. Hardinge, reported Chief Commissioner's apprehension to Chamberlain in January 1916, and considered it too suspicious and pessimistic. Sir A.H.Grant explained Nasrullah stance and policy in the following words:

...has always aimed at preventing, so far as possible, establishment of really good relations between us and our trans-border tribes. A belt of disturbed territory is a safeguard to Afghanistan, so Nasrullah think's...all he wants at present is to detach the Afridis from their allegiance to us incase circumstances later make war between Afghanistan and India in inevitable. I do not believe that the Amir is the definite party to this business, though he probably gives Nasrullah a free hand to intrigue as he think's fit up to a certain point.¹⁴⁶

Nonetheless, in February 1916 the strain situation relaxed when the long-awaited reply of the Amir to the King's and the Viceroy's letters reached Delhi. Meanwhile, the Allies' prestige in Afghanistan was restored due to the Russian successes in Persia and the Caucasus and this success proportionally reinforced Habibullah's position. In the year 1916 the arrival of four garrison battalions from England to India improved the military position of British Government in India. On 17 February 1916 Roos-Keppel in a show of force organized at Peshawar, an areoplane flight demonstration which was seen by 25,000 tribesmen with many Afridi maliks and chiefs among them, together with a good number of Afghans, with tremendous effect on them.¹⁴⁷

In the first half of 1917 the Mahsuds were restive and attacked military convoys, garrisons and barracks. The Chief Commissioner in June 1917 asked for instant military expedition to maintain British writ and prestige. The task was given to Major-General Beynon and with the help Waziristan Field Force subdued the tribes. It is interesting to know that Habibullah sent a letter to the Viceroy, requesting him that the British should

¹⁴⁵ Hopkirk, *On Secret Service East of Constantinople*, p. 186. The self-proclaimed Provisional Government nominated Raja Mahendra Pratap as its President, Barkatullah as Prime Minister and Obaidullah Sindhi as the Minister of Home and Foreign Affairs.

¹⁴⁶ Adamec, *Afghanistan, 1900-1923: A Diplomatic History*, p. 98.

¹⁴⁷ Hopkirk, *On Secret Service East of Constantinople*, p. 186

mildly punish the Mahsuds 'so as not to embarrass him and to prevent the outbreak of a general border conflagration that might draw both countries into war.'¹⁴⁸

The British Government in India was fortunate enough that the call for holy war and the skirmishes and fighting in the tribal areas did not spiral out of control into a general conflagration. The first and foremost factor was the attitude of the Amir Habibullah who had great influence over the trans-border Pashtun tribes. During the course of war the Viceroy time and again informed the Amir about his responsibility, kept informing about the movements of his subject and urged him to control them. To the great relief of the British he not only remained neutral despite under severe pressure in Kabul, he managed with great success to check and control his own subject and the tribes on the other side of the border or otherwise he could create some very serious problems for the British. "His Majesty" writes Roos-Keppel "has displayed unprecedented boldness in his attitude towards the mullas and the Jihad party and has incurred much unpopularity, but his attitude and action have been of incalculable value to us."¹⁴⁹

The second important favourable factor for the Government was the loyal behavior of Afridis, one of the most powerful tribes as majority of them loyal throughout the course of the war. They played an important role to drive 'an effective wedge between the tribes of the northern and southern borders of the province.'¹⁵⁰ Apart from financial inducement, the role and influence of Sahibzada Abdul Qaiyum Khan, the then Assistant Political Agent of Khyber greatly helped in making the Afridis quite during the war. In Roos-Keppel's words, he was "anchor to which Tirah is moored". The third factor in the Government's favour was the cooperation and loyalty of the Khans and Nawabs, and Arbabs in the settled districts who volunteered to help the government to put down the tribal disorders.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ Adamec, *Afghanistan, 1900-1923: A Diplomatic History*, p. 99.

¹⁴⁹ Baha, 'The North-West frontier in the first World War'.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

When First World War ended, the situation on the Frontier appeared to Roos-Keppel quieter and calm, in his opinion, “no history” for the year 1918-19.¹⁵² On 10, January 1919, Roos-Keppel wrote to Maffey: “Everything on the Frontier is so extraordinarily peaceful that it is almost safe to prophesy a quiet summer.”¹⁵³ His opinion soon proved mistaken; as in May 1919, the Third Anglo-Afghan War broke out, once more setting the tribal belt aflame.

Conclusion

The British main concern during the First World War was to maintain peace and stability on its North-West borders which was of great importance due to its strategic location. The situation was very complicated and delicate because India was the soft belly of British Empire and was faced with both internal and external threats. The internal threat was from the freedom fighters who were striving for emancipation from British Raj and they were waiting for an opportunity to strike against the British. The external threat came from Central Powers especially, Germany and Turkey who used these disgruntled groups to fulfill their imperial designs. The key to success lies in the mountains of the Pashtun land where this great game was to be played. The Central Powers saw the role of religion for the success of their plan and strategy. Under the banner of a holy war, the Germans and Turks hoped to start violent insurrection against the British in India. To fulfill their plan they sent mission to Afghanistan to convince the ruler of Afghanistan to side with the Central Powers and declare *Jihad* against the British Raj in India. They also tried to instigate the frontier tribes to rise against the British but with little success. The role of the Amir was of paramount importance as he could create serious problems for the British if agreed to the request of Central Powers.

The British had to fight on home front against a variety of groups entrenched in the tribal areas. The British were lucky to have an experienced officer in the shape of George Roos-Keppel as the Chief-Commissioner, who very tactfully and with great prudence analysed the whole situation on the North-West Frontier Province in general

¹⁵² Administration Report of the North-West Frontier Province, 1918-9 part I., p. 1.

¹⁵³ Roos-Keppel to Maffey cited in Baha, *NW.F.P. Administration under British Rule, 1901-1919*, p. 100.

and tribal areas in particular encounter both local and foreign intrigues. Apart from some occasional fighting in the tribal areas he failed all efforts to form a united front by those groups against the British which could have disastrous political and military consequences. The British failed Turco-German agenda despite their efforts via money, propaganda and diplomacy to provoke large scale uprising in Frontier and the whole of India.

But as Lord Curzon once warned that ‘No man who has read a page of Indian history will ever prophesy about the Frontier’,¹⁵⁴ because crisis on the Frontier always develop with alarming speed, usually when they are unexpected and almost invariably at the worst possible moment. Such was the spectrum immediately after the end of the First World War. Habibullah the man behind British successful policy during the war was assassinated in January 1919; in May 1919 Afghanistan invaded the North-West Frontier of India and the third Anglo-Afghan started and set ablaze the Frontier.

¹⁵⁴ Swinson, *North West Frontier People and Events 1839-1947*, p. 344.