**Invasion of Afghanistan**

By [Thomas Tulenko](http://www.historytoday.com/taxonomy/term/1735) | Published in [History Today](http://www.historytoday.com/taxonomy/term/43) [Volume: 30 Issue: 6](http://www.historytoday.com/taxonomy/term/195)  [1980](http://www.historytoday.com/taxonomy/term/14754)

*'Monumentally bad diplomacy, worse strategy, chaotic military organisation and inept generalship' - Thomas Tulenko describes how great powers have failed in their attacks on Afghanistan. Penned as Soviet tanks rolled into Kabul in December 1979.*

Lord Lytton, Lord Roberts and Sir Henry Rawlinson would have been alarmed but not surprised. With the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Army the Russians have made a classic knight's move against a key pawn in the Great Game in Asia. The earlier British participants in the Game first thought they had detected the Russians lifting their piece a century and a half ago, and the only surprising feature of their move is that it has taken so long to complete. Many of the rules and several of the players in the Game have changed, although two features of the pawn have remained remarkably constant - the land of Afghanistan and the fiercely independent reaction of its peoples to armed outsiders.

The British rulers of India had considerable experience of the difficulty of trying to fit Afghanistan into their system of imperial diplomacy. In the process they made the same move three times within eighty years. If the earlier Afghan Wars are remembered at all, it is usually the first and last that are recalled. The First Afghan War of 1839-42 provided examples galore of monumentally bad diplomacy, worse strategy, chaotic military organisation and inept generalship. Its spectacular climax was the annihilation of an entire British Army during its mid-winter retreat from Kabul. The brief Third Afghan War of 1919 earns a footnote in the military history of the twentieth century for its early use of aircraft to bomb civilian targets.  
  
Even allowing for differences in technology, there is little similarity between those operations and the current Soviet intervention. The Russian military move does, however, bear considerable resemblance to the second British invasion of Afghanistan, which took place a century ago. There is also some similarity between the political circumstances facing the two invading powers, but perhaps the most interesting comparisons lie in the tasks set for the armies. As in the Soviet Union, relations between the Army and the State in the Indian Empire were supremely important and very intimate. The British Indian Army was sent to fight a campaign for which it was not designed, but in which it largely succeeded. Confident of the superiority of its weapons and the power of its combat units, it suffered only one embarrassing local defeat in the field, at Mayan in the summer of 1880. Long-term service above the passes nevertheless revealed flaws in its structure. These problems concerned human organisation rather than technology. A modern military force, given virtually the same mission, may well have to face difficulties of the same sort.  
  
The defence of India was only one, though a very important, concern of the worldwide diplomacy of the British Empire in the nineteenth century. The turbulent years of the late 1870s presented the prospect of war in several areas, and British military leaders had to plan the distribution of their forces accordingly. In the colonies the first call on British troops was in South Africa, where both Bantu and Boers were causing problems for the British administration there. From 1876 the Eastern Crisis developed into a war between Russia and Turkey, with England backing the latter. In April 1878 the Israeli Government threatened to intervene after the Russian armies reached the outskirts of Constantinople. If' Britain had gone to war at this time, however, the main theatre of operations would have been in the Balkans, not Central Asia. In 1877 Lord Lytton, the Viceroy of India, had considered two plans for offensive moves against Russian possessions from India, one put forward by his private military secretary, Colonel George Colley, and the other by the Commander-in-Chief in India, General Haines. But the military planners in London treated Central Asia as a secondary area as far as potential operations were concerned. The military strength of the Empire would most likely be deployed in the eastern Mediterranean and at the Cape. The Indian Army nevertheless had a part to play in this strategy on account of the small size of the British regular army. An Indian division was ordered to Malta in order to impress the world with the notion that Britain, too, could draw upon a seemingly inexhaustible reservoir of trained military manpower. So India was ostensibly given the task of providing auxiliary forces that could fight in European wars.  
  
The organisation and training of the Indian field armies, consequently, showed an increasingly European orientation. Military practice had changed enormously in the two decades since the last severe tests of the British Army, the Crimean War and the Indian Mutiny. The effects of the revolution in weapons, tactics and communications were uncertain when applied to the Indian Army. Indian troops had practical combat experience in irregular operations against tribesmen on the frontiers and in expeditions to China, Abyssinia (Ethiopia) and Malaya. But all these campaigns were short. Most of the frontier work was handled by elite local units such as the Punjab Irregular Force, while overseas the troops fought poorly-armed opponents. The principal task of the Presidential Armies of Bengal, Madras and Bombay was internal security. The British infantry, cavalry and artillery units in India had been doubled since the Mutiny, and these were all of course trained in European warfare. As the Russians expanded south and east in Central Asia during the 1870s, the Indian troops had been armed with modern breech-loading rifles. Large-scale Camps of Exercise practised field manoeuvres which supposedly incorporated the lessons of the Franco-Prussian War. These tended to lack realism as far as both practical field training for the units and the opportunities they provided for commanders to gain experience in handling large bodies of troops were concerned. Nevertheless, the basic style of operation in any encounter with the Russians would be European, even if the Anglo-Indian forces met them in Turkestan, Persia or Afghanistan.

Thanks to Lord Lytton, the Indian Army soon had a major war on its hands, in a likely place but against the wrong enemy. As a riposte to the despatch of the Indian division to Malta, a Russian mission entered Afghanistan and began talks with its ruler, Amir Sher Ali, at Kabul. Although the mission withdrew once the diplomatic storm in Europe had passed, Lytton threatened the Amir with war if he did not put his foreign affairs in the hands of a British Resident. Anticipating the refusal of this ultimatum, Lytton mobilised his forces. In keeping with the Indian Army's penchant for grandiose operations, the Commander-in-Chief, Haines, proposed an elaborate and costly expedition which would be big enough to meet even the Russians. But Lytton initially only wanted to seize Kandahar and the passes leading to Kabul and therefore settled for a force equivalent to five divisions. Though the quarrel was officially only with the Amir, the Army commanders assumed from the start that the tribesmen and townspeople would fight against them as they had during the first invasion in 1839.  Nevertheless the seizure of the passes in the autumn of 1878 and the advance toward Kabul in spring, 1879 produced the desired result in the Treaty of Gandamak. But at the same time these modest operations revealed the difficulties of 'projecting' the Army beyond the borders of India on a large scale.

Most of the crack mountain warfare units of the Punjab Irregular Force had been unavailable in the opening phases of the war because of the possibility of a rising of the tribes in the hills facing India. All of the Indian regiments placed on a war footing had to recruit up to their established strength before moving to the assembly points in the Punjab and Sind. In many cases this meant training up to 200 raw recruits on the line of march. In a long-service army with no reservists this was the only way to make up numbers.

The Bengal regiments chosen to lead the assault were mainly composed of Sikhs and Gurkhas, in order not to test units comprising a high proportion of Muslim troops too severely at the outset. In the Kurram Valley force, General Frederick Roberts had to hang several Pathan sepoys of a Punjab regiment for giving away the position of his column during the night approach march before a battle. Although Afghan religious leaders tried to subvert their loyalties throughout the war, Muslim troops, whatever their provenance, fought well. A further problem arose from the rivalry between the Bombay and Bengal Armies, each of which contributed a division to the South Afghanistan Field Force. Although the Force was mounted from Bombay territory, the Bengal division formed its spearhead. Once operations had begun, several generals with inflated reputations proved incapable of' handling large formations. The most serious problems developed in the support organisation. Clouds of camp followers always accompanied Indian armies in the plains and did the duties performed in modern armies by logistical support and administrative service troops. Many of them were hired by the Commissariat to drive the thousands of carts and pack animals that carried the supplies of the invading forces. In Afghanistan the transport service almost completely broke down.

The new British Resident, Sir Louis Cavagnari, arrived in Kabul in July, 1879 to a hostile reception from the townspeople and several regiments of the Amir's Army. Even so, the Indian field forces began to stand down and prepared to withdraw from Jalalabad and Kandahar. On September 3rd, Afghan regiments in Kabul mutinied and led an attack on the Residency in which Cavagnari and his escort of Indian troops were massacred. Stripping the Punjab of transport, the Indian Army hurriedly re-formed and occupied Kabul and Kandahar, with the intention of riding out the winter in these cities and mounting a spring campaign to crush all resistance in the greater part of the country. While the Viceroy sought a new ruler for Afghanistan, Amir Sher Ali fled and died. His son and successor abdicated, and his half-brother, an ex-pensioner of the Russians, Abdur Rahman, was reluctantly seen as the best choice. The tasks facing the Army in Afghanistan during the winter and spring of 1879-80 were the maintenance of its own lines of communication with India over the passes, the defeat of the Afghan regular army, the intimidation of people in the occupied towns and the breaking of tribal opposition in the countryside. Except for the defeat of one brigade at Maiwand near Kandahar, preceded by the desertion of the troops of the Governor of Kandahar, the Indian forces were too strong to be beaten in the open, but the Afghans were usually able to concentrate and disperse at will, particularly in the hills, and were dangerous on ground of their own choosing. In many ways the job of the thousands of British and Indian troops in the outposts protecting the lines of' communication was more hazardous and difficult than that of the better-publicised forces who marched through central Afghanistan with Stewart and Roberts. Both sides were fully aware of the nature of the conflict. A newspaper correspondent reported an incident with some villagers near Kabul:

They treacherously fired into the Lancers, after having salaamed to them as they passed. The Russians were captured with their guns still in their hands, and were shot without further parley. It is only by such severity and by taking no prisoners in action, that any impressions can be made upon the Afghan mind. Such prisoners as are brought in are tried by a military commission, .and the great majority are shot. There is a just fear that too much leniency may be shown, as the work is rather distasteful to British officers; but as we are an 'avenging army', scruples must be cast aside.

The problem now facing the Government of India was what to do with Afghanistan: break it up into petty states, possibly keeping Kandahar as a strategic 'outwork' of India, or find a new ruler for the whole country and withdraw. It was the better part of a year before a decision was made in favour of withdrawal. This decision was, of course, affected by political factors, notably the cost of the war, the skilful bargaining of Abdur Rahman, the Liberal election victory of April, 1880 and the arrival of a new Viceroy, Lord Ripon. But late in 1879 there had emerged a strong military reason against any prolonged occupation of Afghan territory. Reports from commanders in the field predicted a serious decline in the Army's efficiency, particularly that of the Indian troops. Writing to the Secretary of State for India, Lord Cranbrook, in December, Lytton warned:

I consider that our greatest danger at the present moment (and it is, I think, a very real and rather imminent one) is the danger of *wearing out our native army* . I do not think we can employ native troops for *lengthened* periods beyond the north-west frontier, without serious risk of injury to their spirit. While they are actually fighting they will keep in fairly good heart; but what tries and disgusts them is picket and escort duty during the long dead seasons of trans-frontier service; and the unpopularity of such duty amongst the native troops is aggravated by the fact that the burden of it must unavoidably fall on them more heavily than on the Europeans, who are not so well able to stand exposure to the climate. I am told that the uncongenial experience of one year's trans-frontier service is already beginning to tell injuriously on recruitment, especially the recruitment of Sikhs. If any large proportion of' the native army is to be employed, I will not say permanently, but for another two years only, in Afghanistan, then the organisation and provision of early, easy and frequent reliefs becomes a question of very great practical importance.

By February, 1880, a second winter of constant marching and harassing fatigue duties in a harsh and unhealthy climate had reduced the numbers and impaired the health of every regiment employed. The duration of field service placed a particular strain on the Indian units, which the scale of operations made it impossible to alleviate. Unlike British soldiers, sepoys were not recruited as social atoms. Many had families and lands, and in peaceful years the regiments allowed large numbers of soldiers to visit their distant homes on two to three months' furlough. The practice had been partially disrupted for a frontier campaign in 1877 and again in 1878 for the Malta expedition, followed by the alert for the initial moves against Afghanistan. In March, 1880 Roberts estimated that two years was the limit for a regiment to remain in the field, followed by two years' rest. That limit was now approaching for many regiments, and any lengthy or permanent occupation would require relief by fresh regiments on a large scale. With seventy-five battalions already beyond the frontier, this was impossible. A further warning sign appeared in northern India and the foothills of the Himalayas: potential recruits for Punjabi, Hindustani and Gurkha regiments had virtually stopped coming in. Without furloughs or replacements the Army could not afford another winter above the passes. The withdrawal from Kabul in the autumn of 1880 went off according to the commanders' timetable, although the defeat at Maiwand delayed the evacuation of Kandahar by the Bombay troops until April, 1881. Even in that instance, Roberts announced, before setting out on his famous rescue march from Kabul to Kandahar, that the Bengal units of his force would be sent back to their home stations as soon as any fighting was over.

The Second Afghan War had two unanticipated long-term effects upon the Indian Army and British strategic policy. First, the chaotic performance of the supply and transportation systems in the first campaign provided the occasion for an inquest into the entire Indian military structure by a Commission of enquiry, which sat at Simla in the summer of 1879. For three years Lytton and Colley had been frustrated in their efforts to introduce changes into the military departments, the presidential army commands, the structure of the British and Indian forces, the officering and ethnic composition of Indian regiments, the formation of reserves and many other matters. Backed by the prestige of Roberts and other members with Afghan experience, the Simla Commission's recommendations for extensive changes were endorsed by Ripon and provided a focus for years of infighting over army reform. Second, a new generation of military leaders emerged from the war. The retirement of General Haines in 1881 opened the position of Indian commander-in-chief at a critical time. The Duke of Cambridge, Commander-in-Chief in Britain, wanted the post to go to Sir Neville Chamberlain, a defender of the old post-Mutiny military system. Lytton suggested Colley's radical mentor, Sir Garnet Wolseley. Ripon believed that, while the Indian Army did need rest and rebuilding, the last thing it wanted was 'the reforming genius of the great Sir Garnet'. Fortunately the Afghan War had thrown up two successful and popular Indian Army generals with new views on old military problems – the chief command went to Stewart, then to Roberts five years after. Roberts proved such a forceful and tenacious promoter of the measures he thought necessary to meet the Russian threat to India, that he eventually set the terms of the strategic debate for the entire British Empire. But as far as Afghanistan was concerned, it slipped into the background and did not play a major role in international politics for the next 100 years. Officially independent and neutral from 1919, it continued to be overshadowed by Britain until the dissolution of her Indian Empire in 1947.

Only in the past few years did it become apparent that Afghanistan was once more to become a central factor in international politics. In 1955 the Americans cancelled their aid programme in Afghanistan because of the left-wing policies of its Premier, Mohammed Daud. Thenceforward the Russians became increasingly influential in the country's affairs. The system of roads linking the main Afghan cities with the Russian rail and river termini at Kashka and Termez was a showpiece of Soviet foreign aid. But after Premier Daud overthrew the monarchy in a military coup in 1973 the Russians found themselves presented with a situation that began to look more and more like the one that had exhausted Lord Lytton's patience in 1878. Daud was in turn ousted and killed in 1978 by Nur Mohammed Tarraki, leader of the faction-ridden, Marxist Khalq party. But the Khalq's aggressively revolutionary social policies soon generated such religious opposition in the country that the Soviets, already wary of' the effects of the Islamic revival in Iran on their own Muslim peoples in the Central Asian republics, tried without success to moderate their proteges' programmes. As rebellion spread throughout Afghanistan, Tarraki was killed and supplanted as President by his hard-line deputy, Hafizullah Amin, in September, 1979. By this time it was clear to the Soviet leaders that the Afghan Army could not control the rebellion, even with the assistance of Soviet advisers. A Marxist government on the borders of the Soviet Union was in danger of falling because of its extreme anti-Muslim policies. The Russian solution was to send the Red Army into action for the first time in thirty-five years.

Leaving aside the subsequent killing of Amin – a sort of Cavagnari massacre in reverse – and his replacement by the more tractable, pro-Soviet Babrak Karmal, the military conduct of the Christmas invasion was a swifter, more powerful version of the Indian Army’s occupation of Kabul and Kandahar in the autumn of 1879. The basic principle was to seize all the major cities in overwhelming strength and secure the lines of communication before severe winter weather set in. Th. road to Kabul through the Salang tunnel was to become as vital a supply line to the Russians as the Khyber Pass had been to the British 100 years before.

The invasion force was drawn from the Soviet military districts bordering Afghanistan, in order to give it the appearance of a limited, local operation. It also, thereby, did not disrupt the deployment of first-line divisions in eastern Europe and the Far East, just as India had not drawn upon British reinforcements from elsewhere in the Empire until very late in the Second Afghan War. Although in Afghanistan it was likely that they would have to engage in counter-insurgency operations in mountainous terrain, the Turkestan motor rifle (mechanised infantry) divisions, like all such Soviet units, were designed for high-speed, high-intensity conventional or nuclear warfare. They took with them their full establishment of tanks and other armoured fighting vehicles.

Russian military planners had to take the ethnic composition of their forces into account, although this consideration was never so important to them as it had been for Indian Army commanders. The divisions selected for the task were normally maintained at half strength, manned mostly by two-year conscripts drawn from all over the Soviet Union. The remainder of their numbers was made up nn mobilisation by reservists, who usually came from the districts where the units were stationed. The invading divisions therefore inevitably included a high proportion of Muslims from the Central Asian republics. The Soviets ran risks with the religious and political sentiments of such troops as long as they were employed in the occupation forces.

The Russian commanders were able to give the invasion an unopposed head start: in addition to the numerous advisers and pilots already with the Afghan forces, Amin was induced to ask for a brigade of an airborne division from Fergana to be flown into Bagram air base, north of Kabul, as early as the second week of December. The Soviets struck in the week following Christmas, with the airlift of additional airborne regiments into Kabul (one of them was moved later to Jalalabad, on the road to Pakistan) and Shindand to the west, while a motor-rifle division crossed the border at Kashka to seize Herat, and another from Termez linked up with an airdrop at the Salang Pass. Troops from Shindand moved on to Kandahar. In order to cut off arms supplies to the insurgents, regiments from Herat and Kandahar were placed near the border on the roads leading to Iran and Pakistan. Although the airborne division was soon withdrawn, additional ground troops and aircraft poured into the country. By the first week in February, Soviet strength had risen to five motor rifle divisions plus supporting units, a total of at least 75,000 men.

There was considerable doubt about the loyalty of Afghan troops. Some Afghan armoured units in Kabul resisted the invaders when Amin was overthrown. Unreliable formations were disarmed and placed under the guns of Soviet camps. Many soldiers and even entire units deserted to the rebels. On operations, loyal troops were generally commanded by Russian officers. In mixed formations of Afghan and Soviet troops, the Soviet element increasingly shouldered the burden of counter-attacks against the rebels near Jalalabad, and at Faizabad in Badakhshan.

As in the earlier war, Kabul was the key to national political sentiment. Demonstrations against the occupation and the Karmal Government on February 21st, 1980 led to three days of rioting, during which Afghan Army units mutinied when ordered to fire on civilians. Soviet armour and helicopter gunships moved in from their camps around the city. Several hundred people were killed and thousands arrested before the insurrection was put down.

In the countryside the Soviets replied to guerrilla attacks along the main roads in southern Afghanistan during February by destroying most of the villages between the cities of Ghazni and Kandahar. In March they turned to provinces bordering Pakistan – Paktia, Kunar and Badakhshan – hoping to disrupt the insurgency there before better weather arrived at the end of April. In keeping with the composition of their forces, Soviet commanders preferred to employ artillery, tanks where possible, and air strikes, rather than Afghan or Soviet infantry.

In order to mount large-scale offensives in the spring, the Soviets moved four more divisions into Afghanistan during March. A growing force of well over 100,000 men began to approach the size which could present military planners with manpower problems analogous to those which confronted the Indian Army during the later stages of the Second Afghan War. The Indian Army's long service, volunteer recruiting system operated very differently from the Soviet conscript-reservist one, but whatever the advantages of the system there were bound to be offsetting disadvantages. The key factors were once again the scale and duration of the occupation. The Soviets would unquestionably not actually run short of men, the total pool of trained manpower being enormous. But a prolonged stay could not be sustained by the divisions of the southern military districts of the Soviet Union. The large proportion of reservists in their ranks were theoretically subject to call-up for only three months per year; replacing them in large numbers by conscripts or regulars would entail drawing on divisions from elsewhere in the USSR, eventually disturbing the first-line formations in Europe. A serious demand for politically reliable troops would place a proportionately heavier burden of service on ethnic Russian soldiers.

Like the government of India, the Soviets will undoubtedly cope with the undesirable features of their Afghan enterprise. The unpredictable development of this invasion may again be the emergence of new leaders who will preside over the post-mortem. The Russians do not have Midlothian-style election campaigns, nor a Gladstone to focus criticism on their policies. Yet they are undergoing a slow motion change of government at the highest level, with the passing of Brezhnev and other ageing leaders. Will the battle experience of the new Afghan War provide an opening at the same time for younger generals to come forward and replace those of Second World War vintage who now manage Soviet military affairs? Frederick Roberts made the most of a comparable opportunity in the summer of 1880. His march from Kabul to Kandahar led onwards for twenty-five years, via Burma, Ireland and South Africa, to a field-marshal's baton, an earldom, and the chief command of the British Army.

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The British rulers of India had considerable experience of the difficulty of trying to fit Afghanistan into their system of imperial diplomacy. In the process they made the same move three times within eighty years. If the earlier Afghan Wars are remembered at all, it is usually the first and last that are recalled. The First Afghan War of 1839-42 provided examples galore of monumentally bad diplomacy, worse strategy, chaotic military organisation and inept generalship. Its spectacular climax was the annihilation of an entire British Army during its mid-winter retreat from Kabul. The brief Third Afghan War of 1919 earns a footnote in the military history of the twentieth century for its early use of aircraft to bomb civilian targets.  
  
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The defence of India was only one, though a very important, concern of the worldwide diplomacy of the British Empire in the nineteenth century. The turbulent years of the late 1870s presented the prospect of war in several areas, and British military leaders had to plan the distribution of their forces accordingly. In the colonies the first call on British troops was in South Africa, where both Bantu and Boers were causing problems for the British administration there. From 1876 the Eastern Crisis developed into a war between Russia and Turkey, with England backing the latter. In April 1878 the Israeli Government threatened to intervene after the Russian armies reached the outskirts of Constantinople. If' Britain had gone to war at this time, however, the main theatre of operations would have been in the Balkans, not Central Asia. In 1877 Lord Lytton, the Viceroy of India, had considered two plans for offensive moves against Russian possessions from India, one put forward by his private military secretary, Colonel George Colley, and the other by the Commander-in-Chief in India, General Haines. But the military planners in London treated Central Asia as a secondary area as far as potential operations were concerned. The military strength of the Empire would most likely be deployed in the eastern Mediterranean and at the Cape. The Indian Army nevertheless had a part to play in this strategy on account of the small size of the British regular army. An Indian division was ordered to Malta in order to impress the world with the notion that Britain, too, could draw upon a seemingly inexhaustible reservoir of trained military manpower. So India was ostensibly given the task of providing auxiliary forces that could fight in European wars.  
  
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They treacherously fired into the Lancers, after having salaamed to them as they passed. The Russians were captured with their guns still in their hands, and were shot without further parley. It is only by such severity and by taking no prisoners in action, that any impressions can be made upon the Afghan mind. Such prisoners as are brought in are tried by a military commission, .and the great majority are shot. There is a just fear that too much leniency may be shown, as the work is rather distasteful to British officers; but as we are an 'avenging army', scruples must be cast aside.

The problem now facing the Government of India was what to do with Afghanistan: break it up into petty states, possibly keeping Kandahar as a strategic 'outwork' of India, or find a new ruler for the whole country and withdraw. It was the better part of a year before a decision was made in favour of withdrawal. This decision was, of course, affected by political factors, notably the cost of the war, the skilful bargaining of Abdur Rahman, the Liberal election victory of April, 1880 and the arrival of a new Viceroy, Lord Ripon. But late in 1879 there had emerged a strong military reason against any prolonged occupation of Afghan territory. Reports from commanders in the field predicted a serious decline in the Army's efficiency, particularly that of the Indian troops. Writing to the Secretary of State for India, Lord Cranbrook, in December, Lytton warned:

I consider that our greatest danger at the present moment (and it is, I think, a very real and rather imminent one) is the danger of *wearing out our native army* . I do not think we can employ native troops for *lengthened* periods beyond the north-west frontier, without serious risk of injury to their spirit. While they are actually fighting they will keep in fairly good heart; but what tries and disgusts them is picket and escort duty during the long dead seasons of trans-frontier service; and the unpopularity of such duty amongst the native troops is aggravated by the fact that the burden of it must unavoidably fall on them more heavily than on the Europeans, who are not so well able to stand exposure to the climate. I am told that the uncongenial experience of one year's trans-frontier service is already beginning to tell injuriously on recruitment, especially the recruitment of Sikhs. If any large proportion of' the native army is to be employed, I will not say permanently, but for another two years only, in Afghanistan, then the organisation and provision of early, easy and frequent reliefs becomes a question of very great practical importance.

By February, 1880, a second winter of constant marching and harassing fatigue duties in a harsh and unhealthy climate had reduced the numbers and impaired the health of every regiment employed. The duration of field service placed a particular strain on the Indian units, which the scale of operations made it impossible to alleviate. Unlike British soldiers, sepoys were not recruited as social atoms. Many had families and lands, and in peaceful years the regiments allowed large numbers of soldiers to visit their distant homes on two to three months' furlough. The practice had been partially disrupted for a frontier campaign in 1877 and again in 1878 for the Malta expedition, followed by the alert for the initial moves against Afghanistan. In March, 1880 Roberts estimated that two years was the limit for a regiment to remain in the field, followed by two years' rest. That limit was now approaching for many regiments, and any lengthy or permanent occupation would require relief by fresh regiments on a large scale. With seventy-five battalions already beyond the frontier, this was impossible. A further warning sign appeared in northern India and the foothills of the Himalayas: potential recruits for Punjabi, Hindustani and Gurkha regiments had virtually stopped coming in. Without furloughs or replacements the Army could not afford another winter above the passes. The withdrawal from Kabul in the autumn of 1880 went off according to the commanders' timetable, although the defeat at Maiwand delayed the evacuation of Kandahar by the Bombay troops until April, 1881. Even in that instance, Roberts announced, before setting out on his famous rescue march from Kabul to Kandahar, that the Bengal units of his force would be sent back to their home stations as soon as any fighting was over.

The Second Afghan War had two unanticipated long-term effects upon the Indian Army and British strategic policy. First, the chaotic performance of the supply and transportation systems in the first campaign provided the occasion for an inquest into the entire Indian military structure by a Commission of enquiry, which sat at Simla in the summer of 1879. For three years Lytton and Colley had been frustrated in their efforts to introduce changes into the military departments, the presidential army commands, the structure of the British and Indian forces, the officering and ethnic composition of Indian regiments, the formation of reserves and many other matters. Backed by the prestige of Roberts and other members with Afghan experience, the Simla Commission's recommendations for extensive changes were endorsed by Ripon and provided a focus for years of infighting over army reform. Second, a new generation of military leaders emerged from the war. The retirement of General Haines in 1881 opened the position of Indian commander-in-chief at a critical time. The Duke of Cambridge, Commander-in-Chief in Britain, wanted the post to go to Sir Neville Chamberlain, a defender of the old post-Mutiny military system. Lytton suggested Colley's radical mentor, Sir Garnet Wolseley. Ripon believed that, while the Indian Army did need rest and rebuilding, the last thing it wanted was 'the reforming genius of the great Sir Garnet'. Fortunately the Afghan War had thrown up two successful and popular Indian Army generals with new views on old military problems – the chief command went to Stewart, then to Roberts five years after. Roberts proved such a forceful and tenacious promoter of the measures he thought necessary to meet the Russian threat to India, that he eventually set the terms of the strategic debate for the entire British Empire. But as far as Afghanistan was concerned, it slipped into the background and did not play a major role in international politics for the next 100 years. Officially independent and neutral from 1919, it continued to be overshadowed by Britain until the dissolution of her Indian Empire in 1947.

Only in the past few years did it become apparent that Afghanistan was once more to become a central factor in international politics. In 1955 the Americans cancelled their aid programme in Afghanistan because of the left-wing policies of its Premier, Mohammed Daud. Thenceforward the Russians became increasingly influential in the country's affairs. The system of roads linking the main Afghan cities with the Russian rail and river termini at Kashka and Termez was a showpiece of Soviet foreign aid. But after Premier Daud overthrew the monarchy in a military coup in 1973 the Russians found themselves presented with a situation that began to look more and more like the one that had exhausted Lord Lytton's patience in 1878. Daud was in turn ousted and killed in 1978 by Nur Mohammed Tarraki, leader of the faction-ridden, Marxist Khalq party. But the Khalq's aggressively revolutionary social policies soon generated such religious opposition in the country that the Soviets, already wary of' the effects of the Islamic revival in Iran on their own Muslim peoples in the Central Asian republics, tried without success to moderate their proteges' programmes. As rebellion spread throughout Afghanistan, Tarraki was killed and supplanted as President by his hard-line deputy, Hafizullah Amin, in September, 1979. By this time it was clear to the Soviet leaders that the Afghan Army could not control the rebellion, even with the assistance of Soviet advisers. A Marxist government on the borders of the Soviet Union was in danger of falling because of its extreme anti-Muslim policies. The Russian solution was to send the Red Army into action for the first time in thirty-five years.

Leaving aside the subsequent killing of Amin – a sort of Cavagnari massacre in reverse – and his replacement by the more tractable, pro-Soviet Babrak Karmal, the military conduct of the Christmas invasion was a swifter, more powerful version of the Indian Army’s occupation of Kabul and Kandahar in the autumn of 1879. The basic principle was to seize all the major cities in overwhelming strength and secure the lines of communication before severe winter weather set in. Th. road to Kabul through the Salang tunnel was to become as vital a supply line to the Russians as the Khyber Pass had been to the British 100 years before.

The invasion force was drawn from the Soviet military districts bordering Afghanistan, in order to give it the appearance of a limited, local operation. It also, thereby, did not disrupt the deployment of first-line divisions in eastern Europe and the Far East, just as India had not drawn upon British reinforcements from elsewhere in the Empire until very late in the Second Afghan War. Although in Afghanistan it was likely that they would have to engage in counter-insurgency operations in mountainous terrain, the Turkestan motor rifle (mechanised infantry) divisions, like all such Soviet units, were designed for high-speed, high-intensity conventional or nuclear warfare. They took with them their full establishment of tanks and other armoured fighting vehicles.

Russian military planners had to take the ethnic composition of their forces into account, although this consideration was never so important to them as it had been for Indian Army commanders. The divisions selected for the task were normally maintained at half strength, manned mostly by two-year conscripts drawn from all over the Soviet Union. The remainder of their numbers was made up nn mobilisation by reservists, who usually came from the districts where the units were stationed. The invading divisions therefore inevitably included a high proportion of Muslims from the Central Asian republics. The Soviets ran risks with the religious and political sentiments of such troops as long as they were employed in the occupation forces.

The Russian commanders were able to give the invasion an unopposed head start: in addition to the numerous advisers and pilots already with the Afghan forces, Amin was induced to ask for a brigade of an airborne division from Fergana to be flown into Bagram air base, north of Kabul, as early as the second week of December. The Soviets struck in the week following Christmas, with the airlift of additional airborne regiments into Kabul (one of them was moved later to Jalalabad, on the road to Pakistan) and Shindand to the west, while a motor-rifle division crossed the border at Kashka to seize Herat, and another from Termez linked up with an airdrop at the Salang Pass. Troops from Shindand moved on to Kandahar. In order to cut off arms supplies to the insurgents, regiments from Herat and Kandahar were placed near the border on the roads leading to Iran and Pakistan. Although the airborne division was soon withdrawn, additional ground troops and aircraft poured into the country. By the first week in February, Soviet strength had risen to five motor rifle divisions plus supporting units, a total of at least 75,000 men.

There was considerable doubt about the loyalty of Afghan troops. Some Afghan armoured units in Kabul resisted the invaders when Amin was overthrown. Unreliable formations were disarmed and placed under the guns of Soviet camps. Many soldiers and even entire units deserted to the rebels. On operations, loyal troops were generally commanded by Russian officers. In mixed formations of Afghan and Soviet troops, the Soviet element increasingly shouldered the burden of counter-attacks against the rebels near Jalalabad, and at Faizabad in Badakhshan.

As in the earlier war, Kabul was the key to national political sentiment. Demonstrations against the occupation and the Karmal Government on February 21st, 1980 led to three days of rioting, during which Afghan Army units mutinied when ordered to fire on civilians. Soviet armour and helicopter gunships moved in from their camps around the city. Several hundred people were killed and thousands arrested before the insurrection was put down.

In the countryside the Soviets replied to guerrilla attacks along the main roads in southern Afghanistan during February by destroying most of the villages between the cities of Ghazni and Kandahar. In March they turned to provinces bordering Pakistan – Paktia, Kunar and Badakhshan – hoping to disrupt the insurgency there before better weather arrived at the end of April. In keeping with the composition of their forces, Soviet commanders preferred to employ artillery, tanks where possible, and air strikes, rather than Afghan or Soviet infantry.

In order to mount large-scale offensives in the spring, the Soviets moved four more divisions into Afghanistan during March. A growing force of well over 100,000 men began to approach the size which could present military planners with manpower problems analogous to those which confronted the Indian Army during the later stages of the Second Afghan War. The Indian Army's long service, volunteer recruiting system operated very differently from the Soviet conscript-reservist one, but whatever the advantages of the system there were bound to be offsetting disadvantages. The key factors were once again the scale and duration of the occupation. The Soviets would unquestionably not actually run short of men, the total pool of trained manpower being enormous. But a prolonged stay could not be sustained by the divisions of the southern military districts of the Soviet Union. The large proportion of reservists in their ranks were theoretically subject to call-up for only three months per year; replacing them in large numbers by conscripts or regulars would entail drawing on divisions from elsewhere in the USSR, eventually disturbing the first-line formations in Europe. A serious demand for politically reliable troops would place a proportionately heavier burden of service on ethnic Russian soldiers.

Like the government of India, the Soviets will undoubtedly cope with the undesirable features of their Afghan enterprise. The unpredictable development of this invasion may again be the emergence of new leaders who will preside over the post-mortem. The Russians do not have Midlothian-style election campaigns, nor a Gladstone to focus criticism on their policies. Yet they are undergoing a slow motion change of government at the highest level, with the passing of Brezhnev and other ageing leaders. Will the battle experience of the new Afghan War provide an opening at the same time for younger generals to come forward and replace those of Second World War vintage who now manage Soviet military affairs? Frederick Roberts made the most of a comparable opportunity in the summer of 1880. His march from Kabul to Kandahar led onwards for twenty-five years, via Burma, Ireland and South Africa, to a field-marshal's baton, an earldom, and the chief command of the British Army.