

The Decline of Empires in South Asia by Heather A Campbell, Barnsley, Pen & Sword, 2022, 205 pp., £20 (Hardback), ISBN 9781526775801

Heather Campbell's book discusses British policies towards Persia and Afghanistan after the First World War. She maintains that in order to comprehend these policies, one must understand the persistence of Great Game mentalities among senior policy makers, notably George Curzon. While Curzon was preoccupied with Bolshevik Russia, she suggests that the Government of India, was instead more vexed by growing manifestations of nationalism and pan-Islamic sentiment, and more keenly aware than Curzon of the 'empire's limitations' in the post-war world. Perhaps, as a caveat to that judgement, it might be recalled that some London-based strategists were also keenly aware of the limits of British power. Notable, was Sir Henry Wilson, awoken from his wartime visions of territorial expansion by the need, as Chief of the Imperial General Staff, to find troops to secure British gains amidst post-war unrest, overstretch, and retrenchment. His correspondence encapsulates the multi-faceted post-war crisis of empire, which the author outlines, though possibly belatedly in view of its overall importance to the theme of her book. Campbell suggests that the question for policymakers was not whether Britain should hold onto the empire, but how (xix). This was true for many forward thinkers, but of course doubts had been expressed during the war about the wisdom of accruing certain territories, notably the Caucasus. Woodrow Wilson's ideas of self-determination were also in the wind, and in the minds of some policymakers and their advisers and were a key constraint in that regard.

In fact, Curzon is largely centre stage in this work, and the contextualisation of his ideas relative to the Great Game seems appropriate, even if the pathway is well-trodden. Campbell highlights key themes when seeking to explain the Great Game: notably, fear, on the part of British statesmen, about the security of India and the importance of prestige in the conduct of Britain's imperial foreign policy. She notes some formative aspects of Curzon's background and early career, relative to international rivalries in Asia, including travel and his driving ambition, and reiterates his opposition to the August 1907, Anglo-Russian Convention. Campbell claims that what was Russophobia, in Curzon's case, relative to Tsarist Russia, found a new focus in Bolshevik Russia and that elision led, in some senses, to opportunistic but anachronistic forward policies ill-fitted to resisting Bolshevism penetrating South Asia. Campbell's view that Bolshevism was not understood, in terms of its implications for foreign policy, is correct. Briefly, such policies tended to stoke nationalist and pan-Islamic discontent which the Bolsheviks were then able to manipulate. The Government of India was apprised of this, and of the apparent significance for future British ascendancy in Asia of such discontent, which it sought to appease, but Curzon wasn't and didn't. These efforts to stymie Bolshevik activities in Persia inevitably became entangled in the Russian civil war. In Persia, Curzon propped up the vestiges of Tsarist Russian forces against a possible Bolshevik military onslaught which the Government of India doubted would materialise. As in the pre-war period, it seemed important to shore up Britain's position in southern Persia. Churchill tried to do this, in part, by relocating the capital of Persia to Isfahan. However, such far-fetched notions were pre-empted by the Soviet-Persian treaty of February 1921.

Campbell suggests that by focusing upon a perceived strategic threat, policymakers in London neglected the rise of pan-Islamism and nationalism. For the Government of India, it became increasingly important to wean Afghanistan from Bolshevik influence and to thwart the latter's efforts to capitalise upon popular unrest within India. Campbell ascribes its success in doing so partly to its effective use of information or intelligence about Bolshevik subversion. The Government of India, she maintains, was less imbued with the legacy of great game thinking, which led the Home Government to perceive any indication of Bolshevik influence in Afghanistan as inherently hostile towards India, and as deleterious to British prestige. Rather, Chelmsford, and his successor as viceroy, Lord Reading, were more cautious and inclined to negotiate with the Afghan government. Their intelligence-gathering apparatus also afforded them a more realistic view of Bolshevik and Indian revolutionary activity, than the home authorities. So, too, of the fundamental differences between communism and Islam, and nationalism.

Campbell's verdict on Curzon is damning. While adept at assimilating the unceasing blizzard of memoranda, telegrams, and suchlike, he was '[s]tubborn, combative and narrow-minded' (132). His primacy in the discussion of Asiatic politics rested upon travels conducted decades before: he was out of touch with the changes in the region after the First World War. While Curzon did factor nationalism and pan-Islamism into his calculations about strategy and prestige, he did not take a pronounced interest in those phenomena.

If one were to venture a criticism of this book, it might be that sharper distinctions could have been drawn relative to other literature on the subject. The author doesn't really specify how her interpretation differs from that material. However, Dr Campbell's book is a well-written, interesting, and clearly argued addition to the literature and helps to illuminate, as well as to explain, the neglect of the view from Delhi.

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