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Afghanistan

By [Hugh Beattie](#)

Since 1905 Britain had paid the Afghan ruler, Amir Habibullah, a subsidy and had controlled Afghanistan's foreign relations, and he maintained Afghanistan's neutrality throughout World War I in spite of strong pressure to induce him to join the Central Powers. The war did not have much of an impact on most Afghans (although there were shortages of some commodities), but many died in the global influenza outbreak which began in 1918. When the war ended, Britain failed to reward the Amir for his refusal to take advantage of British weakness during it, and he was assassinated early in 1919. His successor, Amir Amanullah, launched the third Anglo-Afghan War, following which the country became fully independent, but Amanullah's hasty modernization was to lead to his overthrow in 1929.

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Introduction

This article draws attention to some significant features of government, culture, society and economy in early 20th century Afghanistan, before examining the Afghan ruler, [Amir Habibullah's \(1872-1919\)](#) response to the outbreak of the war. It looks at the way he successfully resisted strong pressure from various quarters, including some of his close relatives, to join the Central Powers, and maintained the country's [neutrality](#). It touches on some economic developments, before discussing the effects of the collapse of Russian power in Central Asia in 1917. Finally, the war's longer-term impact is briefly assessed.

Afghanistan in 1914

The modern state of Afghanistan owes its existence to the 19th century rivalry between the [British](#) and [Russian](#) Empires. Britain was anxious to keep Russian influence away from [India's](#) North-West Frontier, and in an effort to do so it invaded Afghanistan in 1839 and 1878. In 1880, British troops withdrew for a second time leaving [Abdur Rahman Khan \(c.1844-1901\)](#) in charge in Kabul. The British were to conduct his foreign relations, and in return, he was to receive an annual subsidy of 1.2 million rupees. This was raised to 1.8 million after he was persuaded in 1893 to agree to the division by the Durand Line of the largely independent frontier region between British India and Afghanistan into Afghan and British spheres of influence.^[1] He died in 1901 and was succeeded by his eldest son, Habibullah Khan. After some initial difficulties, Britain restarted the subsidy and resumed control of Afghanistan's foreign relations.^[2] At this point, it suited Britain and Russia to come to an agreement over Afghanistan, and by the terms of the Anglo-Russian Convention that was signed in 1907 Russia accepted that Afghanistan was outside its sphere of influence.^[3]

Amir Abdur Rahman had taken some cautious steps towards modernizing his administration, for example reorganizing the army, and his successor continued with these. For instance, he established a western-style school (for boys only) in Kabul – the Habibiya College - as well as a military college (the Harbiya); embarked on some road-building projects; and set up some more workshops.^[4] He removed various customs duties to encourage international trade, but did not allow foreign investment or borrowing from foreign banks.^[5] If this hampered economic development, it did mean that Afghanistan did not take out unsustainable loans.

Afghanistan remained in theory at least a more or less absolute monarchy, but Habibullah was somewhat more tolerant of opposition than his father, who had exiled various influential men he regarded as a threat to his rule. Among them had been [Ghulam Muhammad Khan \(1830-1900\)](#), a member of the Barakzai Muhammadzai clan to which the Amir himself belonged. Ghulam Muhammad had eventually settled in Damascus; his son, [Mahmud Tarzi \(1866-1935\)](#), exposed to “the cosmopolitan culture” of the late 19th century [Ottoman Empire](#), became convinced that Afghanistan needed to modernize and reform.^[6] Habibullah allowed him to return in 1902, and with

the support of [Inayatullah Khan \(1888-1946\)](#), the Amir's eldest son, from 1909 until 1919 Tarzi produced one of the first newspapers to be published in Afghanistan, the *Siraj al-Akhbar Afghaniya* (Light of the News of Afghanistan). Taking an anti-British line, this helped to spread [nationalist](#) and modernist ideas, and a group of "Young Afghans" emerged; inspired by Tarzi they wanted to see Afghanistan modernize and become fully independent.^[7]

The Amir's power was not unlimited. His close relatives held most of the key posts in government, and dominated the consultative council (*majlis-i-shura*) of around twenty-five members, and he could not afford to ignore their views. Moreover, in spite of Amir Abdur Rahman's centralizing policies, the government presence in many [rural areas](#) was still weak, particularly in the east and south, much of which was dominated by powerful Pashtun tribal groups: in 1913, for instance there was a serious rising in Khost.^[8] The considerable influence possessed by some religious leaders, such as the Mujaddidis, also restricted the Amir's freedom of action.^[9]

In 1914 therefore, in spite of the cautious modernization pursued by Abdur Rahman and Habibullah, Afghanistan was still a "fragile, emergent state."^[10] The economy was dominated by subsistence farming, though there was a significant amount of trade with Turkistan and India (fruit was exported from the Koh Daman north of Kabul for instance).^[11] Communications, particularly between the north and south of the country, remained slow and often difficult, and local communities remained relatively autonomous. People were divided by culture and history as well as way of life. For example, there was a substantial population of pastoral and trading nomads. There was little sense of national identity, and many different languages were spoken. The majority of Afghans were Sunni Muslims, and religion tended to be a unifying force, but there were significant Imami and Ismaili Shi'a communities, and much smaller minorities of Hindus, Sikhs and Jews, as well as some converts to the Ahmadiyya movement.^[12] Religious identity was also important in helping to generate the sense of connection with the Ottoman Empire that many Afghans had begun to feel at this time. In the later 19th century, the Ottoman [Abdul Hamid II, Sultan of the Turks \(1842-1918\)](#) initiated a vigorous [pan-Islamic](#) policy, claiming that as caliph he had authority over Muslims worldwide not just those living in his [empire](#). Pan-Islamic feeling was strong among Indian Muslims, who helped to influence Afghan opinion in turn.^[13]

The Outbreak of War

When war broke out the Afghan establishment reacted in different ways. Anti-British views led some to argue that Afghanistan should support the Central Powers. Among them were Mahmud Tarzi and the Amir's third son, [Amanullah Khan, Amir of Afghanistan \(1892-1960\)](#), and other modernizers, as well as members of the more conservative faction led by the Amir's brother, [Nasrullah Khan, Prince, son of 'Abd al-Rahman Khan, Amir of Afghanistan \(1874-1921\)](#), a deeply religious man, and most of the religious and tribal leaders. Pressure on the Amir to join the Central Powers grew after the [Ottoman Empire proclaimed a holy war](#) against Britain, [France](#), Russia, [Serbia](#) and [Montenegro](#) in

November 1914. Many Afghans felt that it was their duty to support the sultan as the leader of the Islamic world, and Tarzi's *Siraj al-Akhbar* consistently pursued a strongly anti-British line.^[14] Others, however, thought that neutrality was the best policy; they included two of Habibullah's distant cousins – a former Prime Minister, [Abdul Quddus Khan \(c.1845-1928\)](#), and [Nadir Khan \(1883-1933\)](#), who was appointed the Commander-in-Chief in June, as well as [Bibi Halima \(?-1925\)](#), the influential widow of the late Amir Abdur Rahman.^[15] The Amir himself was well-informed about the international situation. He thought that joining the Central Powers would leave Afghanistan open to a joint Anglo-Russian attack which it would not be strong enough to resist. It was in the country's best interests, he decided, to remain neutral.^[16] He may also have hoped that if the British won the war they would be grateful for his support and allow Afghanistan to become fully independent.^[17]

The fact that Nasrullah had links with many of the influential mullahs living among the semi-independent Pashtun tribal groups living along the frontier between Afghanistan and the Punjab also made things difficult for the Amir. During the 19th century, the rulers of Kabul had claimed a kind of loose authority over them, but the demarcation of the Durand Line in the 1890s meant that many of them became in theory the responsibility of the British. The Afghan government nevertheless continued to maintain a relationship with them, and invited influential men to visit Kabul and receive robes of honor (*khilats*) and other gifts. Before World War I, Nasrullah had encouraged the frontier mullahs to use their influence to persuade the tribes to resist the British and carry out raids along the border with India.^[18] After the Ottomans joined the war, Nasrullah stepped up these efforts. Among the most prominent mullahs were [Mir Muhammad Saheb Jan \(?-1928\)](#), the Badshah of Islampur, who had inherited the mantle of the famous anti-British Mullah, [Najmuddin al-Din, known as the Hadda Mullah \(?-1902\)](#), the [Babra Mullah \(1855-1927\)](#), [Akhundzada Mir Muhammad \(1884-1930\)](#), and the Chaknawar Mullah; Fazal Wahid, the influential [Haji of Turangzai \(1858-1937\)](#), joined them early in 1915. In Waziristan the Mullah Hamzullah, the Lala Pir and [Shahzada Fazal Din \(1898-?\)](#) were particularly influential.^[19] Although he was not always able to make sure that the local officials prevented anti-British activity, Habibullah did his best to counter his brother's efforts.^[20]

The German Mission

To try to persuade the Amir to abandon his "benevolent neutrality towards the British" the [German government](#) sent a diplomatic mission to Kabul in 1915.^[21] It was led by a career diplomat, [Werner Otto von Hentig \(1886-1984\)](#) and an army officer, First Lieutenant [Oskar von Niedermayer \(1885-1948\)](#). Among its members were some men from India and the North-West Frontier. Before the war the German government had tried to attract pan-Islamic support, as well as establishing links with Indian nationalists. Among the latter was [Lala Har Dayal \(1884-1939\)](#), an ascetic intellectual who had helped to establish a revolutionary organization named *Ghadr* (meaning revolt or mutiny), dedicated to overthrowing British rule in India. The *Ghadr* network spread from California to Kabul, the Punjab, Rangoon and Singapore, while in [Germany](#) officials encouraged nationalist Indian students to

establish the [Berlin Committee](#), dedicated to the cause of Indian independence. Two leading nationalists who had links with both *Ghadr* and the Berlin Committee were invited to join Hentig and Niedermayer. They were [Muhammad Barakatullah \(1854-1927\)](#), and [Rajah Mahendra Pratap \(1886-1979\)](#). A Turkish officer, Kazim Bey, also joined the mission, as did eight Pashtuns belonging to the Afridi tribe from the North-West Frontier.^[22] Two of them had been living in the [USA](#). The others were volunteers from a group of Afridis, who, unhappy about fighting in a British Indian Army regiment against the caliph's ally, had crossed over to the German lines in the [Ypres sector](#) in March 1915. They included Mir Mast Kambar Khel Afridi who had been awarded the Iron Cross by [Wilhelm II, German Emperor \(1859-1941\)](#).^[23]

The mission set out across the Iranian desert from Isfahan in July 1915, arriving in Herat in September 1915 after an arduous journey across the central Iranian desert, during which its members evaded British and Russian patrols, coped with extreme heat and dust storms and fought off snakes, scorpions and tarantulas. They recuperated in Herat, finally reached Kabul on 2 October and were escorted to the Amir's guest house in the Bagh-i-Babur. He knew they would put pressure on him to join the Central Powers, and was reluctant to meet them; he stayed at his summer palace at Paghman in the mountains outside Kabul for longer than usual, and did not send cars to bring them to see him until 26 October.^[24] In the meantime, to encourage him to remain neutral, the [British government](#) had decided that [George V, King of Great Britain \(1865-1936\)](#) should write to him personally to thank him for his "friendship and loyalty".^[25] The letter arrived in Kabul early October, accompanied by a note from the Viceroy advising him that his subsidy was to be raised by two lakhs of rupees.^[26]

Anti-British Activities

Other enemies of the British Empire were gathering in Kabul too, among them [Obeidullah Sindhi \(1872-1944\)](#), a Sikh convert to Islam who had studied at the influential anti-British Deoband seminary in northern India. He also arrived in October 1915, and joined Pratap and Barakatullah in setting up a "Provisional Government of India".^[27] Before he left India he and the chancellor of Deoband, [Maulana Mahmud Hassan \(1851-1920\)](#), had devised a plan to use the Hajji of Turangzai, himself a Deoband graduate, to make contact with other Frontier mullahs, and encourage them to incite an anti-British rising along the border.^[28] In Kabul, Obeidullah also joined Nasrullah in his anti-British activities, in pursuit of which he kept in touch not just with the Hajji but also with the Mujahidin.^[29] The Mujahidin, disparagingly referred to by the British as the "Hindustani fanatics", originated in a settlement of anti-British Muslims established in the late 1820s on the Frontier north of Peshawar by [Sayyid Ahmed Barelwi \(1786-1831\)](#). Since then they had kept in touch with sympathizers in India who sent them men and money.^[30] During the later 19th century, they had become less militant; with the outbreak of World War I they resumed their anti-British activities, moving from Sittana to Buner in 1915 and setting up a new branch colony at Chamarkand in Bajaur.^[31]

At this point, the war was not going very well for the Allies, and the winter of 1915/16 was a stressful one for the Amir and the neutral party in Kabul. In 1914, many Indian army units had been sent from India to Europe, and in 1915 to the Middle East and [East Africa](#); at one point during 1915 there were fewer than 15,000 British troops left in India. Not surprisingly, along the Frontier and in Afghanistan itself there was talk of Germany's military strength and of German victory.^[32] Nasrullah's and Obeidullah's appeals to the mullahs had already had some effect. At the end of November 1914 a large tribal army (*lashkar*) from Khost crossed the border and attacked Miranshah in the Tochi valley in northern Waziristan, but was driven off; in January 1915 there was an unsuccessful attack on the Spinakhaisora post (also in the Tochi), and another on Miranshah late in March.^[33] In addition tribesmen (mostly from the British side of the Durand Line) carried out several raids to the north of Peshawar. In April 1915 for example Mohmands, encouraged by the Chaknawar Mullah, attacked Hafiz Kor. In August men from Buner clashed with British troops at Rustam, and early in December 1915 Mohmands looted and burned the Charsadda bazar.^[34]

These incidents were serious enough, but a frontier-wide rising, which might have overwhelmed British defences never materialized. The Amir continued to exert a pacifying influence, and men from different tribes found it difficult to join forces. Nor were the mullahs always willing to work together (for example the Badshah of Islampur and the Babra Mullah were rivals of the Chaknawar mullah).^[35] Another reason was that Nasrullah could not persuade many Afridis to take part. The Afridis lived around the Khyber Pass and in Tirah, and commanded part of the important route between Peshawar in the North-West Frontier Province and Kabul via Jalalabad. Had they joined an attack on British India in force, the consequences could have been serious. To ensure that they did not do so, in 1915 the British doubled the allowances they paid them.^[36]

Nevertheless, this frontier unrest had an impact. It meant that more British troops had to be retained in the North-West Frontier Province, and reduced the number that could be spared for the campaigns of World War I itself. Without the Amir's neutrality, things would almost certainly have been much worse for the British; had he joined in on the side of the Central Powers it has been suggested that they would have had to divert three or four divisions from the [Western Front](#).^[37] The Russians had also sent as many troops as possible to Europe, and Afghan neutrality benefitted their war effort as well. Any Afghan military activity on the frontier with Russian Transcaspia and Turkistan alarmed Russian officials; the British several times reassured them that the Afghans had no aggressive intentions. But both British and Russians, as well as the Amir regarded the situation as potentially dangerous; the government of India wrote to [Konstantin Nabokoff \(1872-1927\)](#), the Russian Consul-General at Calcutta, that Russian officers should avoid any "provocative action" and not overreact should any "frontier incidents" occur.^[38]

The Amir's Response

Habibullah and his advisers held a number of meetings with the members of the German mission.

Niedermayer hoped to persuade the Amir actually to attack British India, but Hentig thought it would be sufficient to induce him to sign a treaty of friendship.^[39] They offered to provide troops, [weapons](#), and even a personal gift of £10 million in gold bullion, if the Amir would commit himself to their cause. However, he was well aware that these were empty promises, and that without a cast-iron guarantee of German or Ottoman military support, which they could not give him, it would be very risky indeed to do so. An able negotiator, his response was to play for time and keep his options open. In the meantime, the mission tried to make a good impression on the people of Kabul. Niedermayer helped with military training.^[40] Some Austrian soldiers had escaped from [prisoner of war](#) camps in Russian Turkistan and were living in Kabul; among them were some skilled craftsmen, and Hentig recruited them to help build a small hospital.^[41] Members of the mission also made contact with Nasrullah and Amanullah. But the mission did itself no favours late in the year by dispatching two sensitive letters by courier to Prince [Henry of Reuss \(1879-1942\)](#), the German Minister at the court of the Shah of Iran. The letters were intercepted and passed on to the Viceroy of India, [Charles Hardinge, Baron Hardinge of Penshurst \(1858-1944\)](#). In them doubts were expressed about the possibility of reaching an agreement with the Amir.^[42] The Viceroy forwarded a translation to him, drawing his attention to the way that in one of the letters, “it was said that they [the mission] were ready to proceed to extremities and might create a coup d’etat.”^[43] Rumours that Nasrullah was plotting against him were current in Kabul, and the Amir was anxious.^[44]

He responded in several ways. He did make various military preparations, partly it seems to show his domestic opponents that he had not entirely ruled out the possibility of intervening in the war; 1,000 [rifles](#) were reportedly sent to the garrison of Mazar-i-Sharif in November 1915 for instance.^[45] Secondly, he summoned several hundred mullahs and local leaders from different parts of the country to Kabul during the winter and early spring of 1915/16. As many as 400 were still there early in May 1916. The Amir aimed to keep them under his eye, and persuade them that under the circumstances neutrality was the right policy, and was not contrary to Islamic teaching.^[46] To help him he arranged for the preparation and distribution of a pamphlet entitled “*Ataat-i-Ulilamr* (the obedience and submission due to a ruler)”.^[47] He and his sons Inayatullah and Amanullah (and reportedly even Nasrullah) held meetings with the visitors, as well as arranging larger gatherings, at which they lectured them on the need for loyalty to the government. At a durbar on 5 April 1916, for example, he explained to them that Muslims should obey their king, however “incompetent and morally impious” he might be, provided he did not perform any actions which explicitly infringed “the religious rules and regulations he [was]... required by the Islamic laws to observe strictly, in order to maintain the prestige of the faith and the rights and principles of the religion from the administrative point of view.”^[48] He tried to buy the visitors’ support too. He paid their living costs in Kabul, and gave them cash presents; he also ordered the local officials to give money to mullahs in their districts.^[49]

Meanwhile, at the end of December 1915, presumably playing for time, the Amir had announced that

he would consider a draft treaty of friendship with Germany. Some weeks were spent drawing this up, and on 25 January 1916 he finally sent emissaries to the German Embassy in Tehran to continue negotiations.^[50] The very next day, however, he had a private interview with the British Agent, Hafez Saifullah Khan, and told him that he intended to continue with his policy of neutrality: on 29 January, he held a large durbar in which he announced this publicly. In February, the Russian army captured the key Ottoman fortress of Erzurum. This cut off Ottoman access to [Iran](#), and made it more or less impossible for the Ottomans to send troops to Afghanistan. This was welcome news for the Amir. He recalled his emissaries from Iran, began to remove pro-German officials, and finally replied to King George V's letter reassuring him that he intended to remain neutral.^[51]

The Amir had a considerable sum of money from his British subsidy in his account in India, and he requested that forty-four lakhs of rupees from it should be forwarded to him, and this was approved.^[52] In March 1916, [Frederic Chelmsford](#), [Lord Chelmsford \(1868-1933\)](#) had replaced Hardinge as Viceroy of India, and in April he gave an undertaking to the Amir that if he remained neutral, another forty-four lakhs would be forthcoming at the end of the war. The Amir may have been testing British friendship and financial stability, but he probably did need the money; providing the visitors from the provinces with board and lodging must have eaten into his reserves.^[53] At about the same time he raised his demands to Hentig and Niedermayer, telling them that he would need the support of 20,000 troops before he could declare war on British India.^[54] Hentig and Niedermayer realized that their mission had failed and decided to leave, even though Nasrullah reportedly begged them to stay, and offered to overthrow his brother and attack India with the help of the Frontier tribes.^[55] The German members of the mission left Kabul for northern Afghanistan with an escort provided by the Amir on 21 May 1916. Avoiding capture by British and Russian forces, they succeeded in getting back to Germany by different routes, Hentig via Xinjiang, Beijing, and the USA, and Niedermayer via Herat, Turkistan, Iran, and Turkey.^[56] One of them, Kurt Wagner, made his way to Herat and stayed there.^[57]

The mission had failed to achieve its primary objective of persuading the Amir to abandon his neutral position, although the Amir did later tell the British agent that at one point early in 1916 he had been on the verge of accepting its overtures.^[58] Nevertheless its arrival in Kabul alarmed the British and the Russians, and must have contributed to the British decision at the end of 1915 to send four battalions of garrison troops (men regarded as unfit for frontline duty) to India.^[59] It showed that the country's isolation could be breached, encouraged Afghan nationalists, and contributed to growing opposition to the Amir. Its members' efforts to win hearts and minds in Kabul demonstrated to the Afghan modernizers, who included the Amir's son Amanullah, that there were other sources of help with development and modernization than Britain and Russia.^[60]

Economy

World War I's impact on Afghanistan was not limited to high-level negotiations and conspiracies in Kabul, or efforts to persuade the Frontier Pashtuns to attack British India. Evidence is sketchy, but the war did affect the Afghan population in various ways; in particular, food seems to have become more expensive.^[61] In March 1916, for instance the prices of flour, barley and mutton were reported to have been steadily rising. One reason was that the government had been requisitioning them as well as other staples including parched wheat mixed with dried mulberries, raisins, and other dried fruits.^[62] Some shortages developed, which may have partly resulted from attempts by members of the ruling elite to corner the market. Nasrullah, for instance, is reported to have obtained a monopoly of the raisin and dried fruit trade with British India, and to have been part of a syndicate that obtained the government contract for the export of timber.^[63] At one point before the war he had bought up Kabul's supplies of kerosene in order to drive up its price, and in January 1918 he did the same with cooking oil; Habibullah sent men to the Hazarajat in central Afghanistan to buy more.^[64] Trade with India increased during the war; after disturbances in Turkistan began in 1916 Afghan exports to Russia rose considerably (and imports from Russia declined).^[65] Some limited industrial development continued; for example a wool factory was opened in January 1915; work on the Jabal-ul-Siraj hydroelectric scheme had begun before the war, and was not completed until the autumn of 1918.^[66]

The Frontier with British India and International Developments

By the time Hentig and Niedermayer had left Kabul, the Amir had written to the Viceroy requesting that Afghanistan might be represented at the post-war peace conference. Afghans were concerned, he said, by some recently published newspaper articles, which suggested that at the end of the war Russia and Britain might partition the country. In his reply, Lord Chelmsford said that only representatives of the belligerent powers would be represented at any such conference, but that "no proposal affecting the interests of Afghanistan will be made or agreed to" at it.^[67] This seems to have satisfied Habibullah for the time being; he still had a great deal to worry about.

Firstly, Pratap and Barakatullah remained in Kabul, as did a number of Turkish agents, and Wagner stayed in Herat until the autumn of 1917. Barakatullah became a newswriter for Nasrullah as well as writing for Muhammad Tarzi's *Siraj al-Akhbar*, which maintained its anti-British stance. Barakatullah, Pratap and Sindhi continued to meet Nasrullah and discuss the possibility of engineering an Afghan invasion of India; they carried on their intrigues with the Frontier tribes through among others two Ottoman Turkish agents, and another Turk, Khairi Effendi, formerly an instructor in the Harbiya.^[68] Nasrullah was probably responsible for producing a letter supposedly signed by the Amir that circulated in Tirah to the south of the Khyber Pass early in 1916; it requested the "*mullas, maliks* [chiefs] and *kazis*" of the district to prepare for a jihad.^[69] The Afridi Mir Mast, who had accompanied the German mission, had already been trying to attract supporters and by the middle of 1916 around 400 Afridis, deserters and men dismissed from the Indian army, had joined him. But the Turkish

agents had little to offer beyond encouragement. Surprisingly perhaps, it seems that they did not actually get much support from Nasrullah; they later complained that he “had ruined the whole movement by failing to send the money and ammunition which he had promised.”^[70] In September, pro-British Afridis forced the agents to move to Rajgal near the Afghan border, and at the end of the year they were recalled to Kabul.^[71]

To the north the Hajji of Turangzai and other mullahs, and the Turkish agents, encouraged the Mohmands to carry out further raids into the Peshawar district in 1916. In October, the British barred them from entering British territory, and installed an electric fence to keep them out; the blockade lasted until July 1917, when the Mohmands finally agreed to a peace settlement. In April 1915, some Mujahidin had joined an attack on a village on the Peshawar border, and the British had also placed them under a blockade. This continued until the autumn of 1917 when the North-West Frontier Province Chief Commissioner, [George Roos-Keppel \(1866-1921\)](#), was able to win over their leader, [Maulavi Niamatullah \(?-1921\)](#).^[72] To the south, in Waziristan, during the spring and early summer of 1917, with encouragement from Nasrullah, Shahzada Fazal Din and Mullah Hamzullah, Mahsuds carried out several serious attacks on British troops. The Amir did what he could to restrain them and a British force was sent to destroy their settlements and crops: the attacks stopped.^[73]

A second problem for the Amir was the situation in Central Asia. This had begun to deteriorate when the Russian government announced in June 1916 that conscription was to be introduced in its Turkistan province.^[74] The collapse of Russian power in the region after the revolution in February 1917 was particularly dangerous for the Amir. It meant that he could no longer argue that his neutral policy was required to keep Afghanistan safe from Russian attack, and his opponents stepped up the pressure on him to join the Central Powers. It also meant that the way was open again for troops to be sent to India through Iran or Transcaucasia into Transcaspia, Turkistan and Afghanistan itself. The Amir and the British feared that if even just a small force arrived on the Afghan border, it might, by appealing to anti-British feeling and pan-Turanian and pan-Islamic ideals, encourage the [Austrian prisoners of war](#) in Kabul, discontented Afghans and the frontier tribes to overthrow the Amir and attack India.^[75] The Viceroy wrote to the Amir asking him for his ideas on how they might best meet the threat (Habibullah asked for more money and weapons, but did not get them).^[76] The Secretary of State for India, [Edwin Montagu \(1879-1924\)](#), even suggested to the Viceroy that he might make a formal alliance with Habibullah and encourage him to support the Amir of Bukhara, [Muhammad Alim \(1880-1944\)](#), against the Bolsheviks; arms for use by Habibullah's forces might be sent directly to Afghanistan's northern frontier he thought. The Viceroy did not agree and nothing came of the idea.^[77] Nevertheless, the Bolsheviks in Central Asia feared that Afghanistan and Britain might join forces and invade Transcaspia or Turkistan.^[78]

The Amir came under even more pressure when on 3 March 1918 Russia made peace with the Central Powers and signed the [Treaty of Brest-Litovsk](#). Article 7 referred to Persia and Afghanistan as “free and independent States”, and the contracting parties undertook to “respect the political and

economic independence and the territorial integrity of these States.”^[79] Afghan nationalists saw this as “the first international recognition of Afghanistan’s independence.”^[80] They were also inspired by the Bolsheviks’ endorsement of the principle of national self-determination, and by the references to the importance of nationality and self-determination in the fourteen-point programme announced by the American President [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#) in January 1918.^[81] They still hoped that the Allies might be defeated, and the atmosphere in Kabul grew tense, especially after the Ottomans captured Tabriz in June 1918; making it easier it seemed for them to send troops to Afghanistan. In July, a student at the Habibia College tried to shoot the Amir while he was driving through the Shor bazaar in Kabul.^[82] The situation in Central Asia continued to be disturbed. Trade was interrupted and the currency market in Kabul was affected by the fall in the value of the rouble, while refugees from the fighting in the region continued to cross the border into Afghanistan. Rumours of German and Ottoman victories and imminent invasion by anti-British forces continued to circulate right up until the signing of the Mudros Armistice between the British and the Ottomans at the end of October 1918.^[83] At the end of the war, Afghanistan was hit by the [influenza epidemic](#) which affected many parts of the world in 1918/19, but it mostly escaped the famines which afflicted Russian Turkistan and Iran at this time. Nevertheless, early in 1918 starvation was reported in the Herat area because so much food was being exported to Russian Turkistan, and the Afghan government tried to stop this.^[84]

Post-war Developments

With skill and determination, Amir Habibullah had maintained Afghan neutrality during the war, in spite of strong opposition from some influential members of the Afghan ruling elite, encouragement from the Ottomans and the German mission, and the presence of the Indian revolutionaries. But by the time the war ended, he had spent all his political capital. To survive he needed to convince people that he had been acting in Afghanistan’s long-term interests. He hoped that Britain would reward him for his tacit support.^[85] On 2 February 1919 he wrote to the Viceroy, requesting his “cooperation in obtaining international recognition of ‘the absolute liberty, freedom of action, and perpetual independence of Afghanistan’ at the Paris Peace conference.”^[86] The Secretary of State instructed the Viceroy to tell the Amir that only belligerents could participate in the conference, leaving Habibullah with nothing to show for his unpopular war policy.^[87] He had survived several attempts on his life, but on 20 February 1919 an assassin finally succeeded in shooting and killing him while he was sleeping in his tent during a hunting trip in Laghman. By now the wartime alliance between the modernizers and the conservatives in the Afghan elite had broken down; Habibullah’s brother Nasrullah made a bid for the throne, but was outmanoeuvred by his nephew, Amanullah, and imprisoned, dying in 1921.

To encourage the British to give the country full independence, Amir Amanullah launched attacks across the Durand Line in May 1919. One column of troops advanced to Bagh at the western

entrance to the Khyber Pass but was driven back. At the end of May, a second crossed the border and briefly laid siege to Thal, but was also forced to withdraw.^[88] In addition, the Afghans occupied Arnawai and Dokalim just across the Chitral border to the north, where they remained until January 1922.^[89] Afghanistan did have a brief taste of modern war when British planes bombed Jalalabad and Amanullah's palace in Kabul. In fact, both sides were eager for peace, and an armistice was proclaimed on 3 June. Britain gave up its claim to control Afghanistan's foreign relations, as well as its subsidy; "[a]n era of Afghan history and Anglo-Afghan relations had come to an end."^[90] After lengthy negotiations, a treaty was finally signed with Britain in November 1921.

The Afghan government began to establish diplomatic relations and sign treaties with a range of other countries. In 1921 for example treaties were concluded with Turkey and Iran. In the same year, a Soviet-Afghan treaty was ratified: it gave the USSR the right to open consulates in five Afghan cities, although British protests meant that none were located near the Indian border.^[91] Britain and the USSR resumed their competition for influence in Afghanistan, which had been more or less in abeyance since the 1907 Convention.

The war and its aftermath made it clear to the Young Afghan nationalists and modernizers how far their country remained unmodernized, and encouraged the new Amir to introduce a much more radical programme than his father or grandfather had dared to attempt. Among other things, he was more willing than his predecessors to allow foreigners to play a part in the country's development, and went much further than them in opening it to external economic and cultural influences. He hoped that Germany, Italy and France might provide a counterbalance to British and Soviet influence, and in the early 1920s, as well as establishing diplomatic relations with Afghanistan, they all "signed separate agreements for full diplomatic relations and economic-scientific and educational cooperation."^[92] Amanullah had been one of the German mission's principal supporters in Kabul, and the German connections became especially important. A Treaty of Friendship was signed with Germany in 1926, and it became the third most influential power in Afghanistan.^[93]

Conclusion

Habibullah had kept his nerve during the war and by staying out of it had contributed to its eventual outcome. Had he threatened to attack India, the British would have had to deploy more troops along the Afghan border, and fewer men would have been available for the British war effort. Had he actually done so, given the extent of discontent with British rule in parts of northern India and within some Indian army units, it is just possible that British control of India itself might have been seriously threatened. Similarly, Afghan interference in Transcaspia or Turkistan could have challenged Russian authority there. It is much more likely, however, that Afghan intervention in British India or Central Asia would have met serious resistance, and had a destructive impact on Afghanistan itself. Therefore, however much Afghans may have disliked his neutral policy, by staying out of the war Habibullah almost certainly helped to preserve them from hardships like those experienced by their

neighbours to the north and west. But the pressures and tensions created by the war – to which the German mission had made a significant contribution – were such that, after it ended, change could no longer be resisted. If Britain had rewarded Habibullah for his tacit support during the war and recognized his country's independence, he would almost certainly have remained on the throne and continued to pursue a more gradual modernization policy than that of his son Amanullah, and the civil war of 1928-29 might have been avoided.

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Notes

1. ↑ See e.g. Barfield, Thomas: *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, Princeton 2010, Ch. 3 *passim*.
2. ↑ Ewans, Martin: *Afghanistan A New History*, Richmond 2001, p. 82. The British kept an Agent in Kabul; he had to be an Indian Sunni Muslim. See Hall, Lesley: *A Brief Guide to Sources for the Study of Afghanistan in the India Office Records*, London 1981, p. 23.
3. ↑ Siegel, Jennifer: *Endgame: Britain, Russia and the Final Struggle for Central Asia*, London /New York 2002, p. xvi. For details of the agreements concerning Iran and Tibet, see pp. 18-19.
4. ↑ Olesen, Asta: *Islam and Politics in Afghanistan: From Tribal State to Absolute Monarchy*, Richmond 1995, p. 98.
5. ↑ Gregorian, Vartan: *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan Politics of Reform and Modernization, 1880-1946*, Stanford 1969, pp. 195, 197, 202.
6. ↑ Arbabzadeh, Nushin: *Modernizing, Nationalizing, Internationalizing: How Mahmud Tarzi's Hybrid Identity Transformed Afghan Literature*, in: Green, Nile/Arbabzadah, Nushin (eds): *Afghanistan in Ink Literature between Diaspora and Nation*, London 2013, p. 38.
7. ↑ Gregorian, Emergence 1969, pp. 163-164, 212-213; Saikal, Amin: *Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival*, London et al. 2012, p. 295 f. 8.
8. ↑ Wyatt, Christopher: *Afghanistan and the Defence of Empire: Diplomacy and Strategy during the Great Game*, London et al. 2011, pp. 197-200.
9. ↑ Nawid, Senzil: *Religious Response to Social Change in Afghanistan 1919-29: King Aman-Allah and the Afghan Ulama*, Costa Mesa 1999, p. 32.
10. ↑ Green, Nile: *Introduction*, in: Green/Arbabzadah (eds), *Afghanistan in Ink* 2013, p. 3.
11. ↑ Hanifi, Shah Mahmud: *Connecting Histories in Afghanistan Market Relations and State Formation on a Colonial Frontier*, Stanford 2008, *passim*.
12. ↑ Canfield, Robert: *Collision of Evolutionary Process and Islamic Ideology*, in: Hauner, Milan/Canfield, Robert L. (eds): *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union: Collision and Transformation*, London 1989, p. 15; Beattie, Hugh: *Etnicidad, nacionalism y el Estudio en Afghanistan*, in: Devalle, Susana (ed.): *Identidad y Etnicidad: Continuidad y Cambio*, Mexico City 2002, pp. 83-117, English translation.

13. † Gregorian, *Emergence* 1969, p. 213; Yapp, Malcolm: *The Making of the Modern Near East 1792-1923*, London et al. 1987, pp. 181-182.
14. † Nawid, *Response* 1999, p. 38; Olesen, *Islam* 1995, p. 101; Saikal, *Afghanistan* 2012, p. 54; Gregorian, *Emergence* 1969, p. 221; Hentig, Werner-Otto von: *Ins verschlossene Land Ein Kampf mit Mensch und Meile*, Potsdam 1943, p. 88; British Library India Office Records (BL IOR), Secret Dept. Minute Paper, L/PS/10/203, pp. 188-189.
15. † Not surprisingly, many merchants trading with India shared this view, see: Olesen, *Islam* 1995, p. 101.
16. † BL L/PS/10/202, *Kabul Diary (KD)*, week ending (w/e) 22.4.1915.
17. † Cambridge University Library (CUL), *Hardinge Papers*, Volume 121, p. 238, Viceroy (V) to Secretary of State (SofS), 5.11.1915.
18. † Nawid, *Response* 1999, p. 34, Adamec, Ludwig: *Afghanistan, 1900-1923: A Diplomatic History*, Berkeley, Los Angeles 1967, p. 78.
19. † Baha N.-W.F.P. *Administration under British Rule 1901-1919*, Islamabad 1970, p. 98, Nawid, *Response* 1999, Table 4, Haroon, Sana: *Frontiers of Faith, Islam in the Indo-Afghan Borderland*, London 2007, pp. 56, 58, 59, 172. It has not been possible to find some of these mullahs' birth and death dates.
20. † See e.g. BL L/PS/10/202, *KD*, w/e 22.5.1915 and w/e 31.5.1915.
21. † Gregorian, *Emergence* 1969, p. 222; Stewart, Jules: *The Kaiser's Mission: A Secret Expedition to Afghanistan in World War I*, London et al. 2014. There was also considerable Ottoman pressure. For example, [Ismail Enver Pasha \(1881-1922\)](#), the Ottoman Minister of War, wrote to the Amir in 1915 reminding him that it was his duty as a Muslim to follow the Caliph's ruling regarding jihad. See: Olesen, *Islam* 1995, p. 105.
22. † Stewart, *Kaiser's Mission* 2014, pp. 30, 51; Adamec, *Afghanistan* 1967, pp. 85, 223, Hopkirk, *On Secret Service East of Constantinople*, Oxford, 1995, pp. 98-99. Niedermayer was already in Iran, having taken part in an earlier mission led by [Wilhelm Wassmuss \(1880-1931\)](#). See e.g. Hughes, Thomas: *The German Mission to Afghanistan, 1915-16*, *German Studies Review* 25 (2002), p. 455.
23. † Before the war nearly 5,000 Pashtuns from the semi-independent areas on the British side of the Frontier (about half were Afridis, so probably they were the largest single tribal contingent) had enlisted in British Indian regiments. See: Baha, *Administration* 1970, p. 84. Some Hazaras were recruited, too. In 1914, many of these men had been taken to fight in Flanders, where their units suffered heavy casualties in various battles during autumn 1914 and spring 1915. See Morton-Jack, George: *The Indian Army on the Western Front*, Cambridge 2014, p. 33, Chapter 7 passim. See also http://historyofpashtuns.blogspot.co.uk/2014/06/when-pashtun-soldiers-refused-to-fight_9509.html (retrieved 20 July 2015).
24. † Hopkirk, *Secret Service* 1995, pp. 156-7.
25. † *Ibid.*, p. 157.
26. † About £25,000, "a sizeable sum" at the time. *Ibid.*, p. 159; Adamec, *Afghanistan* 1967, pp. 88, 91. One lakh is 100,000 rupees.
27. † Baha, *Administration* 1970, p. 93, Arghandawi, Abdul A.: *British Imperialism and Afghanistan's Struggle for Independence 1914-21*, New Delhi 1989, pp. 126-127.
28. † Haroon, *Frontiers*, 2007, pp. 93, 99; Baha, *Administration* 1970, p. 99.
29. † Baha, *Administration* 1970, pp. 93.

30. † See e.g. Ahmad, Qiyamuddin: *The Wahhabi Movement in India*, Calcutta 1966; Arghandawi, *Imperialism* 1970, p. 128.
31. † Baha, *Administration* 1970, pp. 91-3.
32. † *Ibid.*, p. 84, CUL, Hardinge, Volume 121, Viceroy to Secretary of State, p. 315, No. 74, 10.12.1915. The balance of British to Indian regiments thus fell far below the ratio that had been established after the 1857/58 revolt.
33. † British Library (BL) L/PS/10/201, North-West Frontier Provincial Diary (N-WFPD) No. 49 1914; N-WFPDs No. 2 and No. 13 1915.
34. † Baha, *Administration* 1970, p. 86, CUL Hardinge, Volume 90, Part 1, p. 423; Roos-Keppel (R-K) to Viceroy (V), No. 358, 10.12.1915; Nawid, *Response* 1999, p. 39.
35. † CUL Hardinge, Volume 89, Part 1, p. 320b, No. 255, R-K to V, 22.4.1915; p. 369, No. 298, R-K to V, 24.5.1915; also Haroon, *Sana: Frontier of Faith Islam in the Indo-Afghan Borderland*, London 2007, p. 101.
36. † Baha, *Administration* 1970, p. 85.
37. † Barton, William: *India's North-West Frontier*, London 1939, p. 141.
38. † Becker, Seymour: *Russia's Protectorates in Central Asia: Bukhara and Khiva, 1865-1924*, Cambridge, MA 1968, p. 232; see e.g. BL, EUR MSS (EM) E264/55/B Chelmsford Papers, pp. 31-2, Proceeding (Proc.) No. 42, Government of India Foreign and Political Department to Nabokoff, Consul-General for Russia at Calcutta, 22.11.1914, and p. 48, Tel., 26.2.1915, Russian Foreign Office to Nabokoff; p. 135, Consul-General Meshed to GOI, Tel. No. 24-C, 31.5.1915.
39. † Stewart, *Mission* 2014, p. 42.
40. † *Ibid.*, pp. 88, 102, 196.
41. † Hopkirk, *Secret Service* 1995, p. 155.
42. † CUL Hardinge, Volume 91, Part 2, p. 94, No. 144, V to R-K, 28.2.1916.
43. † *Ibid.*
44. † See e.g. Hughes, *The German Mission* 2002, pp. 468-9; Stewart, *Mission* 2014, p. 96-7.
45. † BL L/PS/10/202, KD, w/e 22.11.1915.
46. † BL Chelmsford, EM E264/55/B, p. 78b, Proc. No. 115, Chief Commissioner, N-W.F.P. to GOI F&P Dept., No. 371-C, 14.3.1916, L/PS/10/202 BL KD w/e 30.4.1916 and w/e 8.5.1916.
47. † BL L/PS/10/202, KD w/e 22.4.1916; Nawid, *Response* 1999, p. 40.
48. † BL L/PS/10/202, KD w/e 7.4.1916.
49. † BL L/PS/10/202, KD w/e 31.7.1916.
50. † Hopkirk, *Service* 1995, p. 192.
51. † *Ibid.*, p. 193; Adamec, *Afghanistan* 1967, p. 95.
52. † CUL Hardinge, Volume 122, p. 37, No. 9, V to SofS, 11.2.1916.
53. † BL Chelmsford, EM 264/55A, p. 26, Part 1, Proc. No. 40, No. 187, Amir (A) to V, 30.1.1916, p. 33, Proc. No. 103, V. to A., 8.4.1916, p. 33.
54. † Hopkirk, *Service* 1995, p. 193.
55. † Adamec, *Afghanistan* 1967, p. 95.
56. † Stewart, *Mission* 2014, Chapters 5-7.

57. ↑ Op. cit., p. 143.
58. ↑ BL L/PS/10/203, KD, 30.6.1917; Adamec, Afghanistan 1967, p. 96.
59. ↑ Baha, Administration 1970, p. 90.
60. ↑ Unsuccessful German efforts to conclude a treaty with the Amir continued. See: Adamec, Afghanistan pp. 103-104.
61. ↑ See e.g. BL L/PS/10/202, KD w/e 15.6.1915.
62. ↑ BL L/PS/10/202, KD w/e 15.3.1916, also w/e 8.3.1916.
63. ↑ BL L/PS/10/202, N-WFPD, w/e 8.4.1916.
64. ↑ Jewett, A.C.: An American Engineer in Afghanistan, Minneapolis 1948, p. 311.
65. ↑ Gregorian, Afghanistan 1969, pp. 196-7.
66. ↑ BL L/PS/10/202, KD w/e 8.1.1915.
67. ↑ BL Chelmsford EM E264/55/A, p. 47, Proc. No. 111, A to V, No. 223, 6.5.1916; p. 54, Proc. No. 125, V to A, Kharita No. 6 P.O., 3.7.1916.
68. ↑ Arghandawi, Imperialism 1989, p. 110, Nawid, Response 1999, p. 63, Baha, Administration 1970, p. 94. Obeidullah was also involved in the so-called Silk Letters (*Reshm-i-Rumal*) movement or conspiracy, which was revealed in August 1916. Letters from Obeidullah Sindhi and another Deobandi alumnus, Muhammad Mian Ansari, also in Kabul, to Mahmudul Hasan, who by then was living in the Hejaz, contained details of a plan to establish an organization, Al Junud-ul Rabbaniyya or the "Army of God". Based in Medina, this would engineer an anti-British alliance between the Ottoman Sultan, the Shah of Persia and the Afghan Amir. See: Kelly, Saul: "Crazy in the Extreme"? The Silk Letters Conspiracy, Middle Eastern Studies 49/2, pp. 162-178.
69. ↑ Baha, Administration 1970, p. 89.
70. ↑ Roos-Keppel (R-K) to Viceroy (V), No. 358, 10.12.1915, 1970, p. 97.
71. ↑ Ibid, p. 97.
72. ↑ Ibid, p. 92.
73. ↑ Ibid, pp. 99-100, BL L/PS/10/373, Reg. 2804, Tel. P., No. 692-S, V to SofS, 6.6.1917. For some months after the Brest-Litovsk treaty, many British officials were anxious about a possible German and Ottoman advance to the east into Afghanistan that would threaten the security of British India. See: Schwartz, Benjamin: Divided Attention: Britain's Perception of a German Threat to her Eastern Position in 1918, Journal of Contemporary History 28 (1993), pp. 103-122.
74. ↑ Olcott, Martha: The Basmachi or Freeman's Revolt in Turkestan 1918-24, Soviet Studies XXXIII/ 3 (1981), pp. 353-4.
75. ↑ Gregorian, Emergence 1969, p. 224; Yapp, Near East 1987, p. 288.
76. ↑ BL Chelmsford, EM 264/55/D, p. 41b, Proc. No. 67, V to A, 10.1.1918; p. 50, Proc. No. 111, A to V, 27.5.1918.
77. ↑ BL Chelmsford, EM 264/55/D, p. 51, Proc. No. 114, SofS to V, Tel. P, 6.1.1918; p. 52, Proc. No. 115, Tel. P., V to SoS, No. 733-S, 1.7.1918.
78. ↑ BL Chelmsford, EM 264/55/D, p. 47, Proc. No. 100 [63] Tel. Lt.-Col. Redl, Meshed, to Chief of Gen. Staff, Simla, No. MD-99, 30.5.1918. British troops did occupy Merv from 1 November 1918 to 1 April 1919. See: Hopkirk, Secret Service 1995, p. 376, 387.

79. ↑ Encyclopaedia Iranica, Volume 4, Fasc. 4, p. 447; online: www.iranicaonline.org/articles/brest-litovsk-treaty (retrieved 21 July 2016).
80. ↑ Gregorian, *Emergence* 1969, pp. 224-5.
81. ↑ *Ibid*, p. 225.
82. ↑ Poullada, Leon: *Reform and Rebellion in Afghanistan, 1919-1929: King Amanullah's Failure to Modernize a Tribal Society*, London 1973, p. 45.
83. ↑ BL L/PS/10/203, KD w/e 21.4.1918, 31.5.1918, 8.6.1918, and 22.6.1918.
84. ↑ BL Chelmsford, EM 264/55/D, pp. 11b/12, Proc. No. 78, Political Agent Kurram to Chief Commissioner, North-West Frontier Province, 13.1.1918, pp. 23/4.
85. ↑ Adamec, *Afghanistan* 1967, p. 105.
86. ↑ Gregorian, *Emergence* 1969, p. 225.
87. ↑ Adamec, *Afghanistan* 1967, pp. 105-6.
88. ↑ Robson, Brian: *Crisis on the Frontier: The Third Afghan War and the Campaign in Waziristan 1919-20*, Staplehurst 2004, pp. 100-101. The British regarded Bagh as being on their side of the Durand Line, though it had never been formally demarcated in that area. *Ibid*, p. 16.
89. ↑ *Ibid*, pp. 38-39. The British for their part captured the fortress at Spin Boldak just inside the Afghan border on the road from Quetta to Kandahar. See: Robson, *Crisis* 2004, p. 113.
90. ↑ Hall, *Guide* 1981, p. 24.
91. ↑ Adamec, *Afghanistan's Foreign Affairs* 1974, p. 61. In fact, relations between Afghanistan and the USSR were quite difficult in the years from 1919 to 1922. In 1919, for example, the Soviet representative in Kabul had agreed to hand back Panjdeh (occupied in 1885) to Afghanistan in return for cooperation against the British, and Afghan officials and troops moved into the district, but they were eased out in 1920. The status of Bukhara and Khiva was also an issue. See Adamec, *Afghanistan* 1967, pp. 142-148, Ewans, *Afghanistan* 2001, pp. 92-93.
92. ↑ Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan* 2012, pp. 67-68.
93. ↑ Adamec, *Afghanistan's Foreign Affairs* 1974, p. 98. The Amir may well have been influenced by his contacts with the German mission in 1915-16: he was one of its "chief friends" according to Hughes, *The German Mission* 2002, p. 472. For details of German assistance, see e.g. Adamec, Ludwig: *Germany, Third Power in Afghanistan's Foreign Relations*, in: Grassmuck, George/Adamec, Ludwig (eds): *Afghanistan Some New Approaches*, Ann Arbor 1969, p. 230, and Adamec, *Afghanistan's Foreign Affairs* 1974, p. 76; Nicosia, Francis: 'Drang nach Osten' continued? *Germany and Afghanistan during the Weimar Republic*, *Journal of Contemporary History* (1997), pp. 240-243, 252.

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