

Afghanistan, resistance to 19th-century British invasion

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The British empire invaded Afghanistan twice – in 1838–42 and in 1878–81. In both cases the goal of the invasion was to deflect Russian influence and to prevent it from establishing a foothold in the strategic region. In response to each invasion, the Afghan population revolted against their occupiers.

In 1838 Shah Dost Muhammad Khan, the ruler of Afghanistan, failed to organize significant resistance and soon surrendered. The British army occupied Ghazni, Kabul, and Jalalabad almost effortlessly. The British promoted a puppet emir, Shah Shujah, who agreed to cede to British hegemony.

The majority of the Afghans, however, despised Shah Shujah for his political betrayal and initiated a rebellion against the British, whose army consumed essential food and supplies that raised local prices so high the local population in

the capital of Kabul became impoverished. In turn, the Islamic mullahs began calling for a *jihad* – a holy war against non-believers, or infidels. On November 1, 1842, a popular uprising against the occupation attacked the British garrison in Kabul, killing hundreds of British troops. British commanders decided to withdraw from Kabul and on January 1, 1842, a regiment of 20,000 departed to the nearby cities of Jalalabad and Gandamak. The persistence of raids and ambushes by local militia during a harsh winter turned the retreat into a rout. Fewer than 2,000 reached Jalalabad on January 12, and only 350 of them were lucky to find refuge in Gandamak. Shah Shujah was murdered.

The fate of the Kabul garrison shocked British colonial officials in Calcutta and London, and British garrisons in Ghazni and Jalalabad were ordered to occupy Kabul and to retaliate against the insurgents. The garrison left Kabul in ruins and killed thousands of civilians, but the British recognized that they could occupy Afghanistan only at their own peril. In October 1842, all British troops returned to India.

The second British invasion in 1879 followed a similar scenario. Initially, the British army expedition encountered minimal local resistance, and by January 1879 the Afghan cities of Jalalabad and Qandahar were under military control. On February 20, 1879, Afghan emir Sher Ali Khan died. His son and heir Yakub capitulated by signing the Treaty of Gandamak with British colonial powers, marking the end of Afghan independence. The British mission was established in Kabul.

The military catastrophe during its first invasion of Afghanistan was not instructive to the British, who in the second invasion also ignored swelling popular resentment and animosity all through the country. In September 1879, an uprising in Kabul caught the colonial occupiers by surprise as protesters ravaged British residences, and Louis Cavagnari, the head of the British mission, was killed. The British recaptured Kabul in October 1879, but even brutal reprisals against opponents did not restrain what was then also referred to as a *jihad*, as growing numbers of Pushtun and Tajik guerillas attacked the colonial army. There was, however, no single leader to unite the insurgents. Abdurrahman Khan, the grandson of emir Dost Muhammad, appeared in the north of Afghanistan after 11 years of exile in Russian Turkestan, threatening to

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push the British out of Kabul. His challenger, Ayub Khan, an influential ruler of the western province of Herat, launched an offensive on Qandahar and inflicted a complete defeat on the British near the Afghan village of Maywand in July 1880. Though the British fared better in subsequent military engagements with the Afghan insurgents, the popular uprising was not quelled by the British. In effect, through mobilizing military opposition, both khans seized the popular wave of anti-British sentiment to win the Afghan crown after it became clear that the British were unable to fight the guerilla war in Afghanistan. In 1881, British Queen Victoria officially recognized Abdurrahman Khan as emir of Kabul and withdrew British forces to India, while Ayub Khan went into exile after a series of military defeats. Although the British installed a patron in 1881, both British military interventions in Afghanistan suffered a similar fate, defeated by grassroots guerilla resistance rather than regular armies.

SEE ALSO: Afghanistan, 1978 Revolution and Islamic Civil War; Bacha-i Sakkao's Movement; Bin Laden, Osama (b. 1957) and al-Qaeda; Durrani Empire, Popular Protests, 1747–1823; Taliban, 1996–2007

References and Suggested Readings

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