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Afghans

A population of Afghanistan known for hostile and effective resistance to outside occupation.

For a few thousand years, Afghanistan was a crossroads for conquerors, with the countryside being overrun by Aryans, Greeks, Indians, Persians, Arabs, and Mongols. Over time, this constant influx of conquerors created a population of tough, independent-minded fighters that adopted a policy of maximum resistance to invaders. After the Sassanid Persians were removed from power, a local ruler, Ahmad Shah Durani, assumed control in 1747. He founded a ruling family that remained in power for 100 years before they—as do so many dynasties—became complacent and vulnerable. In 1824 Dost Mohammed overthrew this dissolute dynasty and became amir of Afghanistan, but soon began to feel pressure from major international powers both north and south of him.

The Persians, supported by the Russians, invaded Afghanistan in the 1830s. By chance, Eldred Pottinger, a British spy operating in Afghanistan, broke his cover, offered his assistance to the amir, and led the Afghan army in a successful defense of the country. Rather than establishing closer ties with Great Britain, which currently dominated India to the south, this incident instead provoked a British invasion. Britain did not fear Afghanistan itself, but worried that its domination by Russia would pose a potential threat to India. When Dost Mohammed refused to grant Britain the concessions it demanded, the British decided to put in place a more amenable ruler in his stead. Shah Shuja, Britain's chosen nominee, was of the ruling line Dost Mohammed had overthrown, but he

was weak and therefore despised by the Afghan population. British forces invaded in late 1838 and by August 1839, Dost Mohammed was in exile and Shah Shuja was on the throne. The British army proceeded to put down pockets of resistance around the capital city of Kabul, and the tribes they did not defeat, they pacified with bribery. When in 1841 the bribes stopped, so did tribal cooperation. The British forces in Afghanistan found themselves surrounded in isolated forts, and the Afghans proved themselves able snipers, picking off unwary defenders. This uprising, coupled with the murder of the British ambassador, provoked another invasion.

The British in Kabul decided to flee for India. In January 1843, 4,500 British and Indian soldiers and civilians, along with some 10,000 Afghan supporters, abandoned the city. Only one British soldier made it to the border fort at Jelalabad; the rest were killed by the Afghans. The First Afghan War (as it came to be known) set a pattern for future intervention in the rugged country. A relief army from India forged the Khyber Pass, a feat no other power had ever accomplished, relieved the besieged Jelalabad, and then marched on Kabul. They released British prisoners held in Afghan confinement and burned the Great Bazaar, then marched home. Afghanistan was once again free of outside occupation, and Dost Mohammed returned to power.

The British failed to learn from history. In 1879, they once again attempted to place an envoy in Kabul, hoping to direct Afghanistan's foreign policy and keep out yet another Russian threat. One of Dost Mohammed's sons, Shere Ali, refused Britain's demands and, like his father, fled another army that marched into Kabul. Shere Ali died escaping to Russia, but one

of his brothers, Yakub Khan, was installed as amir with British sufferance. By bowing to British pressure, Yakub Khan incurred the wrath of his people, who once again rose up, slaughtering the envoy and the British soldiers in the Residence of the British representative in the capital. Another relief force from India made its way to Kabul and exacted justice for the British envoy, but soon found itself surrounded and cut off from communication with India. A relief force from the fortress town of Kandahar fought through to Kabul, then learned that Kandahar had been besieged in their absence. Troops from Kabul marched back and recaptured the town. Now seemed like a good time to take everyone home, and the British retreated.

Once again rid of foreigners, the new Amir Abd-ar-Rahman Khan created a standing army and by diplomacy settled his borders with both Russia and British India. All was peaceful until 1919, when a new amir, supported by Afghan nobles, declared war on Britain. Since the British were busy with Indian independence movements, they quickly negotiated a settlement whereby Great Britain recognized Afghan sovereignty. Free from outside threats, the Afghans turned upon each other. Rulers came and went over the next several years, all overthrown and either killed or forced into exile. Although the Afghans established friendly relations with Germany, Italy, and Japan in the 1930s when World War II broke out, they declared themselves neutral. After the war they joined the United Nations.

In 1947 another border dispute flared. The newly formed nation of Pakistan had a large ethnic Pathan population, people closely related to Afghans. When Pakistan would not allow the Pathans a referendum on self-rule, Afghanistan protested and began supporting Pathan insurgents demanding their own homeland, Pashtunistan (or Pathanistan). When the United States established friendly relations with Pakistan and offered military aid, Afghanistan began leaning toward the Soviet Union. With Soviet financial aid, the Afghan government began modernizing the country, but famine in the late 1960s and early 1970s brought aid from around the globe.

Internal political squabbling led to more changes of government, still through violent means, until a revolutionary council established a socialist-style republic in 1978. When devout Muslims in this predominantly Shi'ite country revolted, the new government sought Soviet military assistance. In December 1979, a Soviet-supported coup killed Afghan Prime Minister Hafizullah Amin and Soviet troops occupied the country. Their experience, 100 years after the last British incursion, would be no more successful.

As many as 118,000 Soviet troops were sent to Afghanistan, but they could do little more than hold the major cities and roadways. The Afghan tribesmen, who had harassed and ultimately embarrassed the British, proceeded to do the same to the Soviets. With covert military aid from the United States, the Muslim tribesmen controlled the mountainous countryside and the best Soviet attempts could not break them. In 1989, the disillusioned Soviet government withdrew all its combat troops, and once again the Afghans continued to fight among themselves. The blood of centuries of conquerors seems to have bred in the Afghan people the ability to fight; history has forced on them an ample opportunity to exercise that ability.

References: Adamec, Ludwig, *Dictionary of Afghan Wars, Revolutions, and Insurgencies* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1996); Bilgrami, Ashgar, *Afghanistan and British India* (New Delhi: Sterling Press, 1972); Farwell, Byron, *Queen Victoria's Little Wars* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972); Jones, Seth, *In the graveyard of empires: America's war in Afghanistan*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., ©2009).

Afrika Korps

An outstanding unit of the Nazi army in North Africa in World War II.

Geography and terrain are always important when armies meet on the battlefield, and this was especially clear in North Africa during World War II. The desert environment determined the way war was fought in that campaign. Soldiers not only fought the enemy; they