Tournament of Shadows: The Struggle for the Mastery of Central Asia


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"The Great Game," the geopolitical contest between Tsarist Russia and Victorian Britain for the control of Central Asia, is well known to scholars of Asian history and culture. Lieutenant Arthur Conolly (1807-1842) of the 6th Bengal Native Light Cavalry, who initiated British reconnaissance and mapmaking in the region, published a popular version of his exploits in 1834 in which he coined the term.[1] In 1837, Count Karl Vasilyevich Nesselrode, the Tsar’s Foreign Minister from 1822 to 1856, created another descriptive term for this conflict, "Tournament of Shadows."

Husband and wife authors Meyer and Brysac begin this latest synthesis of the "Game/Tournament" around 1810 and carry it through into the post-World War II period. While on vacation to the Indian Subcontinent they visited the Khyber Pass in December 1990, not long after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan but before the now decade-old civil-sectarian-ethnic war in that country. Based upon that visit and Meyer’s fascination with the original Great Game, which he characterizes as a Victorian prelude to the Cold War, the authors decided to prepare a new and up-to-date assessment of the classic Great Game, more recent descendants, and the playing field.

"Tournament of Shadows" is the culmination of a five-year research and writing effort in which the authors made use of some newly declassified government documents – for example the Nazi SS expedition to Lhasa in 1938-1939, and the efforts of the Russian mystic and artist Nicholas Roerich to locate a Buddhist Utopia for New Dealer Henry Wallace. Meyer and Brysac traveled to India, Pakistan, Nepal, and western China – but not Afghanistan or the former Soviet Central Asia – in their quest. In London they studied archival materials in the Royal Geographical Society Library, the Oriental and India Office, and School for Oriental and African Studies. In Washington they also examined OSS, SS, and other documents in the collections of the National Archives and Records Administration and at the Library of Congress, as well as papers in the archives at Harvard and Oxford universities, and the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Library at Hyde Park, New York.

Meyer is the former London bureau chief for *The Washington Post* and for nearly twenty years (until 1998) wrote on foreign affairs as a member of the Editorial Board of *The New York Times*. He has previously published four books on art and archaeology, three on political science, and one on journalism.[2] His wife, Shareen Blair Brysac, is a former lead dancer in the companies of Merce Cunningham, Paul Taylor, and Jose Limon. Brysac is also a producer, writer and director of a prize-winning of prime-time documentaries for CBS News, was awarded several Emmies and earned a Peabody Award,

The book is written in a pleasing narrative style that emphasizes individuals, their accomplishments and failures, and their roles in the contest for the vast Eurasian heartland, as well as the Russian goal of establishing geopolitical and economic links to South Asia and, in particular, a seaport on the Indian Ocean. Russian control of Central Asia and the necessary expansion southward was mitigated by British control of the Indian Subcontinent. Between the Russians to the north and the British to the southeast was Afghanistan. Hence, the political and military control of “The Land of the Afghans,” Nepal and Tibet to the east became central to the British plan to thwart Russian influence in the region. The players in the Great Game included explorers, cartographers, military men, diplomats, mystics, archaeologists, and spies. Filling in the “blank spaces” on the map of Central Asia became an obsession not only for Russians and Britons, but also Germans, Chinese, and Japanese.

William Moorcroft (1767-1825), the first Englishman to qualify as a veterinarian, was “a British horse doctor” who in the employ of the East India Company ostensibly sought superior cavalry breeding stock for the British military. He served as an intelligence scout from 1812-1825 and explored Tibet, Afghanistan, and Bukhara; and in 1824 became the first Englishman to describe the Khyber Pass. The Russian mission to Kabul and the Persian siege of Herat (1837-1838) are also related, as are the exploits of Alexander “Bokhara” Burnes, who opened up Central Asia to British commerce. His brother, Charles Burnes was a British resident in Kabul whose violent death precipitated the First Anglo-Afghan War (1839-1842), and preceded the decimation of 12,000 British officers, native troops, their families and camp followers during the retreat from Kabul to Jalalabad. The authors provide an excellent commentary on this signal event, including an exposition on Dr. William Brydon, the British physician who was the sole Briton to survive that disaster.

The authors also document briefly the history of Russian expansionism since 1580 and Russia’s in the Crimean War (1853-1856), followed by the Indian Mutiny/Sepoy Revolt/First War of Indian Independence against the British East India Company army and civilians in the Subcontinent (1857-1858). They recount the role of the Rani of Jhansi, who was “wronged and slain by the British” (p. 143) and became the Indian heroine of the Great Mutiny, the siege of Delhi, and the actions of Sir John and Sir Henry Lawrence at Lucknow. Meyer and Brysoc also set the context of European expansion in Asia and Africa, and the flourishing slave trade in Khiva “a commerce, a sport, and a way of life.” Beginning in 1861, Russian forces, spurred on by the economic incentive of acquiring Central Asian lands for cotton production, took Tashkent in 1865, and Bukhara became a Russian protectorate three years later. Januarius MacGahan, a *New York Herald Tribune* journalist, covered the Russian advance into Central Asia, befriended General Skobelev, and would report on five major wars before his death at age 33 in 1878.

As the Russians continued their steady advance, the British sought to maintain a presence in Kabul, but the mission of Pierre Louis Napoleon Cavagnari was massacred by the Herati during an eight-hour battle in 1879. The Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878-1881), involving 30,000 Britons and their allies, proved to be another disaster for the British and a detriment to the Gladstone government, since it overlapped chronologically with the Zulu War in South Africa.

Also characterized are Sarat Chandra Das, a Bengali explorer who visited Lhasa in the secret service of the Raj; Nicholas Przhevalsky, a Russophile Pole explorer of Central Asia; and Pyotr Kozlov, a Russian explorer who discovered Khara-Khoto (the “Black City of the Tanguts”) in Mongolia; Agvan Dorzhiev (1854-1937), a Buriat Buddhist lama who sought Russian support for a Mongol-Tibetan kingdom, whose presence brought “British bayonets to Lhasa” in 1904 and who would later perish in a Stalinist Gulag; and Lord George Nathaniel Curzon (1859-1925), the able and dashing British Viceroy of India from 1898 to 1905 who later served as British Foreign Secretary and boldly authorized Francis Younghusband (1863-1942), the Imperial Proconsul and a Tolstoyan mystic to invade Tibet in 1903-1904, prefiguring the current conflict with China over Tibet. Lord Curzon, who initiated the Archaeological Survey of India to locate and map antiquities and obtain strategic military information, appointed himself as Director of Antiquities.

The authors present a delightful assessment of the “era of punditry” in Tibet (pundits being Indians trained expressly to pass independently through Himalayan borders in disguise). A number of British and Russian expeditions to Tibet and Lhasa were turned back. Chapter Ten, “Mystical Imperialism,” is devoted to Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, nee Hahn (1831-1891), the
Russian-born founder of the Theosophical Society, a pantheistic philosophical-religious system. The authors characterize her as “one of the most interesting and unscrupulous impostors” as she served Russian interests in Central Asia.

Explorer-archaeologists also played a major role in mapping Central Asia and in the Great Game. Sven Anders Hedin (1865-1952), a cartographer and world famous Swedish explorer honored by the Royal Geographical Society, became estranged from the British after receiving patronage from the Tsar, and emerged as an apologist for the German Kaiser and later for Adolf Hitler. In 1936 Hedin, “a real catch for Hitler,” gave the opening address at the Berlin Olympic Games. Hedin’s thirteen books on southern Tibet and his Central Asian maps were so detailed and accurate that several intelligence services used these during the post-World War II period to locate Soviet and Chinese nuclear test facilities.

Sir Aurel Stein (1862-1943), a Hungarian-born Jew and British-naturalized salaried civil servant, was an explorer who led four expeditions to Central Asia (Turkestan in 1900-1901, to Dunhuang in 1906-1909, the northern Silk Route [China to Iran] 1913-1916, and 1930-1931). Unlike other operatives, Stein never traveled in disguise, but kept meticulous accounts, and conducted numerous excavations during the same period as the Russian archaeological expedition under Dimitri Klementzin in 1898, a Japanese expedition in 1909, a French expedition from 1902 to 1914. International intrigues led to artifact looting, site destruction, and foul play, as the Chinese gradually became “masters of their own house” in terms of their archaeological and historical patrimony. Stein’s final expedition clashed with emerging Chinese nationalism, and he died in Kabul, Afghanistan 26 October 1943.

William Woodville Rockhill (1854-1914), an American scholar, Sinophile, and Teddy Roosevelt’s personal envoy to China, established the “Open Door” policy with China and was the first American to befriend and advise a Dalai Lama. Meyer and Brysac state that Rockhill was “one of the few first-rate Americans to have left his attainments so thoroughly unadvertised” (p. 424). In assessing the British in the early decades of the 20th century, the authors explain the importance of cricket and “sport of every kind as the mortar that joined remote outposts with the home country” (p. 425). American interests centered on Tibet and the Dalai Lama; for example, William Montgomery McGovern was a young American who, disguised as a Tibetan coolie, reached Lhasa, traversing the Raj’s strict prohibition. He later became a military liaison between the Joint Chiefs of Staff and President Franklin Roosevelt. In the 1930s, Suydam Cutting, Theodore Roosevelt Jr. and his brother, Kermit, searched the Tibetan borderlands for the Giant Panda, and assisted Cutting in obtaining an invitation to Lhasa in 1937. This is the period when Lhasa was likened to the Shangri-La of James Hilton’s Lost Horizon.

One of the most unusual characters was Nicholas Roerich (1874-1947), a Russian artist and theosophical mystic who, under the patronage of occult-influenced Henry Wallace (Secretary of Agriculture under Franklin Roosevelt), searched for four years for the fabled, hidden paradise of Shambhala located in Russian territory north of Tibet. Meyer and Brysac also report for the first time on significant documents found in the Roosevelt Library at Hyde Park, particularly an American-British-Japanese plan dated to 1933 to control Tibet and reincarnate the “Shambhala Project.” Communist rule in Outer Mongolia and the potential threat of a Buddhist holy war are reviewed, as are Wallace’s indiscretions and to publication of the so-called “Guru Letters” by the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. We are left wondering if Roerich was a spy, and for whom, since he supported Russia during World War II but provided sensitive Soviet information to the Anglo-Americans.

German presence in Central Asia, which began with Alexander von Humboldt in the 1840s (and later included Ritter, von Richthofen, Filchner, Schlegel, Muller, and Nazi sympathizer Sven Hedin) was renewed by Dr Captain Ernst Schafer, a captain in the SS. A protege of Heinrich Himmler who established the “Ancestral Heritage Office” (Ahnenerbe) in 1935, Schafer reached Lhasa in 1938 while on a mission to confirm Nazi theories about the origins of the Aryan race. The Nazi search for cultural relics later inspired Stephen Spielberg’s film Raiders of the Lost Ark, but Schafer also had a politico-military mission to use Abwher agents to foment tribal revolt on the North West Frontier of British India. In June 1941 Afghanistan lost its pivotal position in the Great Game when Hitler attacked the Soviet Union, and the British and Russians became anti-Nazi allies. Iran was partitioned and occupied by the British and Russians when the Iranians refused to expel Axis nationals; Afghan politicians reacted to this and acceded to the expulsion of their resident Axis nationals in October 1941, thereby avoiding Allied occupation. Promoted to Major, Schafer returned to Munich and headed the Reich Institute for Central Asia, which was concerned with racial studies and ethnic cleansing. In India, an escaped German military prisoner, Austrian mountaineer
Heinrich Harrer, made his way to Tibet and would write an autobiography entitled *Seven Years in Tibet*, later to become a motion picture.[3]

Brooke Dolan, a Philadelphia socialite and natural scientist had previously led two expeditions to Tibet, and with Ilia Tolstoy, grandson of Leo Tolstoy, would lead an OSS mission to Lhasa that would bring the White House into contact with the seven-year old Fourteenth Dalai Lama. Contrary to a British plan, Dolan and Tolstoy became advocates for Tibetan national autonomy. The Tibetans themselves may have been misled by an FDR letter addressed to the Dalai Lama as a spiritual leader, assuming that the correspondence affirmed political recognition. Once again, documents in the Roosevelt Library at Hyde Park illuminate the complex politico-diplomatic situation.

Meyer and Brysac end their narrative abruptly in the early post-war period. Readers will find that the “Notes and Sources” provide useful bibliographical essays, but are difficult to use since these are essentially endnotes and because there is no separate alphabetical bibliography. Nearly all of the entries are in English or are English-language translations of an original publication; Russian, German, and Chinese sources are not used. A majority of the references are to secondary sources or syntheses, and there are no references to the authors studies of newly available archival documents until very late in the narrative (Chapters 17 through 22 and Epilogue). Nonetheless, the use of diaries and personal documents adds immeasurably to the narrative. The inability to assess conflicting source materials (or resolve those differences) leads potentially to some one-sided opinions. Readers may also wish to consult an early German assessment of the Russians in Central Asia by Hellwald (1874), Russian perspectives on Britain (Martens 1879, Stumm 1995), British views on the Russians (Rodnouhough 1885), and an American reevaluation of the Russians (Zviagelskaia 1995). An early British assessment of Afghanistan, Russia and Central Asia is found in Lyons (1910).[4]

A tabulation of photographic credits and permissions precedes a twelve page double-column proper-noun index that does not cover the notes and sources. A few errors of commission are noted, but the narrative is carefully composed and is enhanced by the authors’ training in history, journalism, fine arts, and literature. However, the names of John William Kaye and Przhevalsky appear with several spelling variations, and Louis Dupree was an anthropologist rather than an historian. Some typographical errors also escaped the final editing: Gantok, Lambdon = Lambton, Calcutta = Calcutta, and projects = projects.

This compelling volume is delightful to read but is not devoured easily because of the incredible amount of detail the authors have incorporated into their narrative. Any reader must appreciate the Herculean effort the authors have made to synthesize an incredible amount of material from a diversity of sources and create an unparalleled panorama. The word pictures that they paint provide rich and unforgettable details; therefore *Tournament of Shadows* is a more thorough account of the period 1810 to 1950 than other works such as Peter Hopkirk’s *The Great Game* (1990). Like Meyer, Hopkirk was also a newspaper correspondent (a staff writer for *The Times* [London] and chief reporter for the Middle and Far East). The scope of *Tournament of Shadows* includes much more than Hopkirk’s (1990) narrative, and incorporates much of which is found in Hopkirk’s other writings (1984, 1994, 1995).[5]

The excitement of Kipling’s writings (*Kim* and *Gunga Din*, for example) and swashbuckling literature and cinema (*Indiana Jones* and *Seven Years in Tibet*) pervades Tournament, which is, perhaps, more literary than historical in its presentation but, nonetheless, remains very scholarly. A positive note is that Meyer and Brysac often trace the lives of major characters from their early, pre-Great Game years through the post-Asian experiences and to their deaths so we are not left to wonder “whatever happened to so-and-so.”

This is a superbly narrated, splendid work that covers the geopolitics of the struggle for the control of Central Asia beginning with Russian and British colonial expansionism, the protection of frontiers, the control of natural resources and trade routes, and the quest for mystical lands such as Shangri-La. The Anglo-Russian competition for Central Asia with its explorations, cartographic efforts, proxy wars, spies, espionage, treachery, and intrigues continues in a different form today. As the authors note, “the players in the Great Game were men of action, not reflection.” Indeed, “no heroes stood taller in the Victorian pantheon than explorers” – adding notables such as Przevalsky, Hedin, and Stein. There are important political and historical lessons yet to be learned as we enter the new millennium and the obsession with Central Asia and the Great Game continue. [6]

Notes

[1]. Arthur Conolly, *Journey to the North of India, Overland from England, Through Russia, Persia, and Af-


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