

PART I: THE BUILDING OF THE STATE

CHAPTER 1

The 'Iron Amir': Abdur Rahman Khan (1880-1901)

When Abdur Rahman was recognized as Amir of Afghanistan by the British in 1880 he had spent 11 years in exile in Samarkand and Tashkent, living on a generous stipend from the governor-general and commander of the Russian forces in Central Asia, General K. von Kaufman. He had been given the opportunity, however, as a guest of the Russians, to perceive that the greatest threat to Afghan independence came from the north. As he wrote in his autobiography:

The Russian policy of aggression is slow and steady, but firm and unchangeable. ... Their habit of forward movement resembles the habit of an elephant, who examines a spot thoroughly before he places his foot upon it, and when once he puts his weight there is no going back, and not taking another step in a hurry until he has put his full weight on the first foot, and has smashed everything that lies under it.¹

The new state had no choice but to follow a policy of neutrality. As Abdur Rahman himself said, 'How can a small power like Afghanistan, which is like a goat between two lions, or a grain of wheat between two strong millstones of the grinding mill, stand in the midway of the stones without being ground to dust?'²

The new amir was a grandson of the resilient Dost Mohammad, who had returned to Kabul as amir in 1843, after a self-imposed exile in India as a guest of the British who had ousted him in the first place.³ The cornerstones of Dost Mohammad's policy were to restore internal Afghan unity, which had so eluded him during his previous reign, and to keep on friendly terms with the British. He reconquered Kandahar, Mazar-i-Sharif and the north, and reoccupied Peshawar after it was abandoned by the Sikhs during the two Anglo-Sikh Wars of 1845-46 and 1848-49. These wars had also resulted in the British occupation of Kashmir, which they sold in 1846 to the Hindu rajah of the adjacent autonomous state of Jammu, and in their permanent

annexation of the Punjab in 1849. In 1843, the British had also seized the turbulent realms of the Mirs of Sind, formerly tributaries of the amirs of Kabul. This gave them control of the Indus, and provided a convenient base of operations for their future incursions into Afghan territories west of the Indus.⁴

Since developments in Persia, Europe, India and Central Asia had a direct or indirect bearing on Afghan history before the accession of Abdur Rahman and during his reign, it is necessary to open a long parenthesis at this stage of the narrative.

In 1855 the British were concerned (as in 1838) by Persian designs on Herat, behind which they saw a hidden Russian hand, and by the uncertain outcome relative to west and Central Asia of the Crimean War which was then being fought. They therefore sought and obtained a treaty of friendship with Dost Mohammad. The Treaty of Peshawar of 30 March 1855 embodied three points: mutual peace and friendship, respect for each other's territorial integrity, and a commitment that the friends and enemies of one party were to be considered friends and enemies of the other. In October 1856 the Persians occupied Herat, with the collusion of the ruling Afghan Durrani prince of the Saddozai branch, hostile to the Mohammadzai ruler of Kabul, Dost Mohammad, who threatened his autonomy. The Persian aggression immediately precipitated a three-month war with the British in which the Persians were defeated, evacuated Herat, and agreed to abandon forever their irredentist claims to the area. Thus for the first time, imperial Britain, acting in its own self-interest, guaranteed Afghanistan's territorial integrity.

At the beginning of the Persian war, Dost was invited to Peshawar to sign a supplementary agreement under which he was to receive a subsidy of one lakh of rupees (£10,000) per month, for the duration of the war, in order to maintain an army capable of resisting aggression from the west and the north. It must be said that while the honourable Dost kept his side of the bargain, the British did not, as Dost and his successors were to discover to their cost. The sincerity of the amir's friendship for the British was put to a severe test when the so-called Indian Mutiny broke out in May 1857.

Many hotheads in Dost's entourage wanted him to assist their fellow Muslims who were revolting in British India. But the amir resisted. It may have been due to an ingrained Pashtun sense of honour - a promise was a promise to be kept. He may also have been keenly aware of British power based on its human and material resources, both in India and in Europe, where the Crimean War had ended in a Russian defeat. During the Mutiny, the amir reiterated to the British his pledge of non-interference.

Dost Mohammad died in 1863, a month after he had conquered Herat and realized his dream of Afghan unity. Dupree refers to a popular Afghan saying which would be a fitting epitaph: 'Is Dost Mohammad dead that there

is now no justice in the land?' It would also be a telling comment on the situation that prevailed after his passing – another concrete illustration of Dupree's theory of 'fusion and fission'.

Dost Mohammad had outlived three of his favourite sons and had passed over his two oldest surviving sons, Afzal and Azam, to designate their younger half-brother, Sher Ali, as his successor. True to form, a fratricidal war followed, with Sher Ali defeating his two rebellious elder half-brothers, and then turning on his two full brothers and defeating them in a battle at which he lost his eldest son and heir. Meanwhile Afzal Khan's son, Abdur Rahman, who had fled to Bukhara after his father's defeat, raised an army in the north and defeated Sher Ali in three consecutive battles with the help of his uncle Azam. He then entered Kabul and placed his father on the throne in May 1866. When Afzal died in 1867, Azam succeeded him. But he soon alienated his nephew, and Abdur Rahman left Kabul for Mazar-i-Sharif and, after Sher Ali's reconquest of Kabul and Kandahar in January 1869 to re-affirm his former authority as amir, moved into a long exile in Russian Central Asia.

These last ten years of Sher Ali's rule were to prove decisive for the future of Afghanistan. Relying as his father did on his friendship with the British, he was overwhelmed by the local effects of external events over which he had no control. These events and developments affected in the long run not only the territorial integrity of Afghanistan and defined its future borders, but also the sovereignty of its rulers over their own territory.

The background to these developments was the steady expansion of the czarist empire eastwards beyond the Urals to the Pacific, and southwards to the Black Sea, the Caucasus and across to the Central Asian steppes. The empire-building had begun with Peter the Great (1672-1725), the first Russian czar or emperor, and continued inexorably under Catherine the Great (1729-96), who also transformed Russia into a European power to be reckoned with. She acquired more territory in the south by waging a series of successful wars against the Ottoman Turks. The Russian annexation of the Crimea in 1783 had given her control of the north coast of the Black Sea. By 1833 Russia had pushed forward towards the Caspian, coming into armed conflict on the way with the Persians. In that same year, after success in another war with the Turks, the Russians concluded the Treaty of Unkiar-Skelessi, which also imposed a virtual Russian protectorate over the Ottoman dependencies in the Balkans. Russia's pretext was the protection of the sultan's Christian Orthodox subjects, but her objectives were much more ambitious.

The roots of what came to be known as the 'Eastern Question' were the decline of Ottoman power and the efforts of some of the European powers, mainly czarist Russia, to take advantage of the situation to fulfil their own imperialist agendas. The Russians had already nibbled at and gnawed away

the territories of the Ottoman sultan, who had now become the 'Sick Man of Europe'. There was a two-fold threat to the fragile edifice of the European balance of power, built up and carefully tended by statesmen, notably Metternich and Palmerston, after Napoleon's final defeat at Waterloo and the Congress of Vienna in 1815.

The first of these threats was the surge of nationalistic feelings among the restless Christian subjects of the sultan that not only threatened the peace but also invited outside intervention. As the majority of these Christians were affiliated to Orthodox churches organized along ethnic national lines, the Russians claimed that the Treaty of Kutchuk-Kainardji, concluded in 1774 after a military victory over the Turks that gave them freedom of navigation in the Black Sea and the right to send their merchant ships through the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles Straits, had also accorded them the right to make representations on behalf of the sultan's Christian Orthodox subjects.

This treaty was followed by others that registered further Russian gains at the expense of the Ottoman Turks: the Treaties of Jassy (1792) and Bucharest (1812) confirmed the annexations of the Crimea and of Bessarabia, and also gave the Russians control of the whole northern hinterland of the Black Sea between the Pruth and Kuban rivers. The 1812 treaty also extracted from the Turks the grant of a measure of autonomy to their provinces of Wallachia and Moldavia. Russian intervention in support of the Greek War of Independence, which began in 1821, had the Turks suing for peace, and led to the Treaty of Adrianople (1829), under which the Russians extracted more concessions: territory at the mouth of the Danube and in the Caucasus, a virtual Russian protectorate over Wallachia and Moldavia, autonomy for Greece, and to a lesser extent for the Serbs who had begun their revolt against Turkish rule in 1804.

In 1832 the Russians occupied the Dardanelles, purportedly in defence of the sultan against the forces of the Albanian Mohammad Ali, the talented and militant Ottoman governor of Egypt who had developed ambitions of his own. The Treaty of Unkiar-Skelessi of 1833 was a signal of Russian intentions to establish a virtual protectorate over the sultan's European provinces, and to wrest control from the Turks of the Dardanelles, which would have given their navy direct and untrammelled access to the warm-water ports of the Mediterranean for the first time.

These Russian actions, which were carried out unilaterally, thus threatened to unravel the whole fabric of the balance of power in Europe. Britain and Austria especially were determined to replace the bilateral provisions of the 1833 treaty with internationally endorsed regulations concerning the Straits. They succeeded in this by concluding the Straits Convention of 1841 to which Russia and Turkey were also parties, thereby setting a precedent for concerted international action on the Eastern Question. In so doing they

replaced the implicit Russian protectorate over the sultan's European dominions with a general European protectorate that included Turkey. The main idea was to ensure that the Ottoman Empire did not collapse, or, if it did, that the outcome would not favour any single European state and endanger the balance of power.

The next major Russian intervention in Turkish affairs led to the Crimean War in which, as a result of diplomatic miscalculations on the part of Czar Nicholas I, Russia had to face an armed coalition of European states arrayed against her in defence of Turkey. The Treaty of Paris (1856), which ended the war, was a major setback for Russia: the return of southern Bessarabia to Turkey, the placing of Wallachia, Moldavia and Serbia under international guarantees, and the interdiction of Russian naval vessels in the Black Sea.

The Crimean War was also of major significance to nineteenth-century Europe. It signalled the collapse of the Concert of Europe, whereby the victors in the war against Napoleon - Britain, Russia, Austria and Prussia - had cooperated to maintain the peace of Europe for four decades. The break-up of the old coalition permitted the autonomous German and Italian states to free themselves from Austrian influence and unite to become major European powers and eventually imperialists in their own right.

The last major Russian intervention in Europe occurred as a result of a general uprising in the Balkans against Turkish rule that led to a Russian declaration of war against Turkey. The war of 1877-78 ended in a crushing Turkish defeat. In the Treaty of San Stefano of 3 March 1878, the Russians exacted a heavy price. In addition to the payment of a large indemnity, the Turks were deprived of almost all their European possessions: the recognition of the independence of Serbia, Montenegro, Romania (Wallachia and Moldavia) and of a Greater Bulgaria, and a Russian right to occupy Bulgaria for two years. Turkey also had to cede to Russia the Danube delta, the Dobruja region and four regions in the Caucasus.

Bismarck, the Prussian 'Iron Chancellor' of a consolidated German Empire, was called upon to play the role of 'honest broker' at the Congress of Berlin (June-July 1878), convened to deal with the implications of the latest developments relating to the Eastern Question. The Congress was a turning point in the history of Europe, as well as in world history, since it heralded the beginnings of a generalized scramble for empire, especially in Africa, by the major European powers, including Germany. But the Congress itself was convened by the foreign minister of Austria-Hungary to curb Russian hegemonistic ambitions in the Balkans.

The Berlin Congress, while acknowledging the principle of national self-determination for the Balkan peoples, also re-affirmed the principle that the status of the Ottoman Empire and of its constituent territories was to be

jointly decided, and not through unilateral measures. The territorial dispensations adopted in Berlin were as follows: Serbia and Montenegro were accorded their independence, but their territory was reduced; Romania was declared independent, but Russia was allowed to retain Bessarabia (now Moldova), with Romania compensated by the addition of the Dobruja region; Bulgaria was divided into three parts, of which two (Eastern Rumelia and Macedonia) were allowed to continue under Turkish rule; Bosnia and Herzegovina were mandated to Austria-Hungary; and finally, in return for a guarantee covering Asiatic Turkey, Great Britain obtained from the Turks the use of Cyprus as a naval base.

Benjamin Disraeli, prime minister since 1874 and British plenipotentiary at the Congress of Berlin, was undoubtedly the star of the show, in Bismarck's words: 'Der alte Jude, dast ist der Mann' ('That old Jew, he's the man'). Disraeli had manoeuvred adroitly to prevent Russia from gaining any strategic advantages in the eastern Mediterranean. He succeeded brilliantly. Cyprus was a bonus. On his return to London Disraeli announced that the Congress of Berlin had brought 'peace with honour'.⁵

Disraeli was an unabashed imperialist and leading advocate of the 'forward policy' in India and Afghanistan.⁶ But when he put an end to its European ambitions, Russia then turned with renewed vigour towards Asia, a *Drang nach Osten* (drive towards the East) that was to cause many a headache in the British chancelleries of London and Calcutta. Moreover, the full aspirations of some of the Balkan peoples were frustrated. Neither Disraeli nor Bismarck had much sympathy for the Balkan Slavs whom they considered violent trouble makers.⁷ But their unfulfilled aspirations led to prolonged tensions that did not augur well for the European future: the assassin's bullet that triggered the First World War was fired in the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo.

It is interesting to note that the dispensations of the Congress of Berlin did not cover Russian territorial acquisitions at the expense of Turkey north and east of the Black Sea. What was not forbidden was therefore permitted. After their defeat in the Crimean War, the Russians resumed their steady advance from the Caspian to the Aral Sea, which they reached by 1864. They then proceeded further east by imposing their control over the Central Asian steppes north of the Syr Darya (Jaxartes), before penetrating southwards to the Amu Darya (Oxus). These rivers loosely defined the confines of the domains of the amir of Bukhara. In 1869 Russia had reduced the amir to vassal status, and had taken control of the cities of Tashkent and Samarkand. In 1872 the Russians moved into the territory of the khanate of Khiva bordering on Afghanistan. In 1876 they occupied the khanate of Kokand further east, which brought them to the borders of Chinese Sinkiang.

Such was the geo-political situation in Central Asia that confronted the Amir Sher Ali and the British in the last quarter of the century. The Great Game was on. When Disraeli became prime minister, the tacit policy of non-intervention in the internal affairs of Afghanistan ended, and was replaced by the 'forward policy', the blueprint for which had been prepared by Sir Henry Rawlinson in 1868 when the Russians were advancing towards the Oxus. Its main objectives, which were rejected at the time, were to occupy Quetta in Baluchistan, gain control of the Afghan area by subsidizing the amir as a British protégé, and establish a permanent British mission in Kabul to keep the Russians at bay. In 1876 Disraeli appointed Lord Lytton as viceroy of India to implement the new policy.

In 1876 Quetta was occupied and converted into a forward military base. An Indian Muslim had represented the British in Kabul since the reign of Dost Mohammad, and the Russians had sent a Muslim agent in 1875 as their representative at the court of Sher Ali. When the viceroy demanded that the amir accept a European-staffed mission in Kabul, Sher Ali refused on the grounds that the Russians might want reciprocal rights. The British reply was that they had received Russian assurances that Afghanistan was outside their sphere of interest - assurances treated with some scepticism by the amir and contradicted in a letter containing veiled threats and insinuations that he had received from the Russian commander in Central Asia, General von Kaufman, which he passed on to the viceroy as his response.

In the meantime, developments were precipitated by the arrival in Kabul on 22 July 1878, a day after the signing of the Treaty of Berlin, of a Russian diplomatic mission led by General Stolietov without the authorization of Sher Ali. The timing was surely a coincidence, more as a response to the implementation of Britain's forward policy than to developments in Europe. Three weeks later the viceroy demanded that Sher Ali accept a British mission, to counter the Russian one. Sher Ali's response was delayed, as he had gone into the traditionally long period of mourning after the death of a son, his designated heir.

The British, with little understanding or sensitivity, accused him of procrastination, and sent in an officer, Major Louis Cavagnari, to herald the arrival of the mission led by Sir Neville Chamberlain. Permission was politely refused, but the refusal was considered a national insult to the British, who issued an ultimatum calling for an explanation by 20 November. The reply, which arrived on 19 October, was held to be unsatisfactory and the British launched a three-pronged attack into Afghan territory on 21 November. One column advanced from Quetta to Kandahar, another through the Khyber Pass into Jalalabad, and a central column, commanded by Sir Frederick Roberts, advanced through Kurram.

A desperate Sher Ali had concluded a defensive alliance with the Russians, and appealed for military assistance when the British invaded. When General von Kaufman refused, citing the daunting logistics of moving masses of men and materials over the Hindu Kush in winter, Sher Ali travelled to Mazar-i-Sharif with the intention of proceeding to St Petersburg to plead his cause in person with the czar. His attempts to proceed were blocked by the Russians, who advised him to make his peace with the British. It is possible that von Kaufman had already been apprised of the assurance given to London by St Petersburg that the Russian mission in Kabul would be withdrawn, since, after Berlin, war no longer threatened their two countries in Europe.

If this assurance was sincere or true, it would appear that the Second Anglo-Afghan War was a futile exercise as far as British interests were concerned.⁸ But once a course of action is decided upon and undertaken, subsequent events take on a life of their own, generate their own momentum, and are driven by an inner logic, however undesirable or irrational the consequences. The three-pronged invasion of Afghanistan could not have been a hastily planned enterprise, launched at short notice. All that was needed was a pretext.

In February 1879 Sher Ali died in Mazar. His eldest son, Yaqub Khan, acting as regent in Kabul, signed the Treaty of Gandamak in May 1879 in order to forestall further British advances into Afghan territory. Yaqub had no choice. He was under pressure, and there was no organized internal resistance at this stage to stop the British forces. The main points of the treaty, disgraceful to Afghan eyes, were that the British would control Afghanistan's foreign affairs, with British representatives resident in Kabul and other cities whose security would be guaranteed by the amir. He also had to cede large areas west of the Indus – Kurram, Pishin and Sibi – and agree to the extension of British control to the Khyber and Michni passes.

This meant in effect the virtual secession of the Peshawar Valley and of other Afghan territories west of the Indus that, less than 15 years later, would serve the British in the demarcation of the Durand Line – thereafter the de facto frontier between Afghanistan and British India. In return for these concessions, the amir was to receive £60,000 a year and some vaguely worded guarantees of assistance in case of foreign aggression.

In July 1879 Cavagnari arrived with an escort to take up his functions as British Resident in Kabul. Surrounded by a hostile population, he was murdered in September by mutinous Afghan soldiers who had been assigned to protect him. In retaliation General Roberts moved from his base in Kurram and reached Kabul on 12 October 1879. Yaqub abdicated his throne and went into exile in India. Roberts then became the virtual ruler of Kabul, instigating a rule of terror that was bitterly resisted. The British forces found themselves under siege. In the meantime Abdur Rahman had crossed the

Oxus, and, with the help of the northern khans and begs who rallied to his cause, marched on Kabul, declaring himself amir in Charikar, north of Kabul, on 20 July 1880. The British had in fact endorsed him as a credible candidate for the amirate in Kabul. But meanwhile, on 27 July, the forces of the Afghan resistance under the command of Ayub Khan, another son of Sher Ali, that had gathered in Ghazni inflicted a disastrous defeat on the British in open battle at Maiwand, near Kandahar. The battle produced a famous Afghan heroine, Malalai, who, seeing the men faltering, used her veil as a standard and encouraged the warriors by shouting:

Young love, if you do not fall in the battle of Maiwand,
By God, someone is saving you as a token of shame.⁹

As before, the loss of British prestige could not be left unavenged. Roberts put together a mobile force that marched with remarkable speed from Kabul to Kandahar to defeat Ayub. For his superior generalship in the Afghan War, he was ennobled as Lord Roberts of Kandahar. In the British elections of April 1880, however, Disraeli's Tories had been defeated by Gladstone's Liberals. The new prime minister replaced Lord Lytton as viceroy, and it was decided to withdraw the remaining British forces from Kandahar in April 1881, much to the chagrin of the leading advocates of the forward policy. A new era in Afghanistan had begun.

The situation of Afghanistan is somewhat unique in the Muslim world. The territory owed its existence as a political entity to the rivalry between foreign imperialist powers who made it into a harmless buffer state. Technically it was never a colony, but the Treaty of Gandamak had imposed limitations on the amir's sovereignty. As the Great Game played itself out, the amir was forced to accept other infringements of his sovereignty.

The Russian advances in Central Asia continued, and followed their own logic in geo-political terms: south-west of the Oxus, the khanate of Khiva was subdued in 1881 in a horrendous scenario involving the wholesale massacre of the 6000 defenders of the Tekke Turcoman fortress of Goek Tepe, followed by the occupation of the Oasis of Merv in 1884 - causing an outbreak of 'Mervousness' in British imperial circles, according to some irreverent London wags - and the occupation of the Pandjeh Oasis in 1886.

The occupation of the Pandjeh Oasis provoked a crisis, since the area was traditionally an Afghan territory that paid tribute to the governor of Herat. Afghan troops in the area fought the Russians and were defeated. But as Britain had made itself responsible for the conduct of Afghanistan's foreign affairs, London informed St Petersburg that an attack would be considered a threat to Britain. But the threat was not followed up when the Russians occupied the Pandjeh, causing Abdur Rahman to complain that he could not rely on British assistance, despite their pledges, in his time of need. But

during this so-called Pandjeh Incident, it was made clear to the Russians that any further advance south into Afghan territory, such as Herat, would amount to a *casus belli*. In fact Russian nationalist opinion called for the seizure of Herat as the first step in reaching the Indian Ocean and realizing the dream of a warm-water port, especially now that the Dardanelles was out of bounds.¹⁰

Eventually a joint Anglo-Russian boundary commission fixed the north-western frontier with Turkestan, as the whole of Russian Central Asia came to be called. In 1895–96 another commission, again without Afghan participation, established the frontier in the north-east. Since the British did not want to be faced with a common frontier with Russia, they imposed Afghan sovereignty over the Wakhan Corridor in the High Pamirs, against the wishes of the amir who, as he said, had enough problems with his own people and did not want to be held responsible for ‘the Kirghiz bandits’ in the Wakhan and the Pamirs.¹¹ This inaccessible region of perpetual glaciers gave Afghanistan a common frontier with China for the first time in history.

Alongside the Russian advances in Central Asia, the British were consolidating their hold on the nominally Afghan areas west of the Indus by bludgeoning the local Pashtun rulers and tribal chiefs into acquiescence, and by building a string of fortified outposts to keep out armed incursions into the valleys and plains of the frontier regions by raiders from the Afghan side who were outside the range of their punitive action. The Durand Line, a contentious issue in Anglo-Afghan relations (and later with Pakistan), was designed to bring stability to the frontier regions.

The external pressures on Afghanistan generated a kind of nationalism, not strong enough to forge a national consciousness, or a sense of national unity, but strong enough, together with its religion, to reinforce the traditional Afghan spirit of independence. Islam brought together Afghans of all social classes in times of national crisis. But perceptions of what was in the national interest differed radically. For the backward, unlettered, rural masses, subject to the petrifying influence of malik and mullah, nationalism meant the conservation of a traditional way of life. The spirit of independence took on a nationalistic dimension when the country was threatened by non-Muslim powers, British or Russian. Then resistance took on the specifically religious aspect of a *jihad* (holy war) against ‘infidels’. But there was another form of nationalism, actively pursued by the Kabul court and its associated bureaucracy, whose objective was to strengthen Afghan independence through modernization. These different perceptions were to clash dramatically in the twentieth century.

In order to understand the characteristics peculiar to the Afghan state and society, it may be helpful to have recourse to the concept of ‘spaces’.¹² The first was geographical space, the territory defined by external powers.

The second space was that occupied by the durable Durrani dynasty and the associated court aristocracy which, however tenuous its hold on the country as a central authority, was a focus for a national consciousness that could sometimes transcend internal rivalries and divisions. This space was considerably strengthened by Abdur Rahman through a ruthless indigenous version of the Bismarckian means of uniting the German states through 'blood and iron'.

The 'Iron Amir' himself described his task as putting 'in order all those hundreds of petty chiefs, plunderers, robbers and cut-throats. This necessitated breaking down the feudal and tribal system and substituting one grand community under one law and one rule.'¹³ In almost continuous warfare during his 20-year reign, rebellions were punished by mass executions, or deportations such as the forced resettlement of thousands of Ghilzai Pashtun tribesmen, chief rivals of the dominant Abdalis in regions where they were neutralized in the midst of hostile Hazaras, Uzbeks, Turkmen and Tajiks.¹⁴

The amir then mobilized the Ghilzais in a jihad against the Shi'ite Hazaras, considered heretical, whom they plundered, displaced and sometimes sold into slavery. Tribe after tribe and ethnic group after ethnic group were subdued. He established a ruthless police force to subjugate suspected opponents and uncooperative officials. Recalcitrant Pashtun leaders were exiled. The pacification of the country was completed by the wholly gratuitous conquest of a remote mountain people in the north-east, the non-Muslim Kalash of Kafiristan (Land of the Unbelievers), who were forcibly converted to Islam. Their habitat was renamed Nuristan (Land of Light). Abdur Rahman tried to keep his countrymen isolated from the world, prohibiting Afghans from travelling abroad without authorization, and screening out alien influences that might undermine Afghan independence.

Lacking a viable resource base to finance his campaigns and impose his will, Abdur Rahman was dependent on the British for substantial supplies of arms and ammunition. In 1882 the British granted him an annual subsidy of 1.2 million Indian rupees, raised to 1.8 million rupees in 1893 when the Durand Line was demarcated, and to 1.85 million in 1897 at the time of the imposition of the Wakhan Corridor on the amir. These subsidies partially financed the recruitment of conscripts as troops, independent of the tribal levies, and who were accountable to the amir alone. Village and clan elders were also obliged to supply the amir with one eligible fighting man from groups of eight households, with the other seven households taxed to provide for his support. Armed with his powers of coercion, the amir was also able to expand his domestic tax base, by levying direct taxes on landowners.

Abdur Rahman also sought to legitimize his power in Islamic terms by assuming the role of *imam*, or spiritual leader of the Afghan *millat*, the geographical sub-division of the community of the Muslim faithful (the *umma*).

He linked his temporal power to his assumed religious role by insisting that as vice-regent of Allah, who appointed kings as shepherds to guard his flock, he derived his duties and responsibilities from the will of Allah and ruled by divine guidance. He claimed that as he was called upon to wage a holy war by unifying and strengthening the country against infidels, it was the duty of all good Muslims to support his efforts, for example by paying taxes.

In his self-proclaimed role of imam, the amir assumed the prerogative of *mujtahid*, or interpreter of the *shari'a*, thus depriving the *ulema* (theologians and jurists) of their authority in religious matters. He took over the administration of the religious endowments (*waqf*) that had ensured the economic self-sufficiency, independence and power of the clerical establishment. The amir also set up ministerial departments to oversee the administration of justice and education, traditional monopolies of the clerics, thus turning the latter into paid servants of the state. As such they were ordered to undergo formal examinations to prove their suitability as state officials, a strategy aimed at controlling their numbers. These measures severely undermined the power of the *ulema*.

Abdur Rahman also sought to detach the khans and other dignitaries from their local ethnic and tribal ties through a mix of strategies. He split the major provinces into districts and sub-districts that did not correspond to tribal and ethnic territorial divisions. He appointed governors and administrators who were neither members of his immediate family, whom he kept at court in order to prevent them from creating political mischief in the provinces, nor indigenous to the regions they administered on his behalf. He decreed that all taxes collected locally were to be remitted to the centre.

Borrowing from the hierarchical system of state organization characteristic of the Ottomans and other Turkic peoples, Abdur Rahman tried to create an elite class of bureaucrats dependent on him alone and detached from their tribal or ethnic affiliations. The core of this elite was from the royal family and from among the leading chiefs of the Mohammadzai clan whose power-base was in Kandahar. The amir kept his own sons at court and also had other leading notables reside in Kabul, physically removed from their local power-bases and ethnic or tribal forces. These measures were designed to preempt the usual power struggles at the death of a ruler and ensure an orderly succession to the throne. Sons of influential families in the provinces were also brought to court as hostages for their fathers' good behaviour and to be trained to serve the state. Another innovation was the recruitment of slave boys (*ghulam bache*) from areas forcibly brought by the amir under his control and from leading non-Pashtun families, who were also trained, like the Janissaries in the Ottoman Empire, to man the state bureaucracy and officer the army. These were often married off to Mohammadzai women of the ruling class, to reinforce political loyalty through family ties.

As a concession to the Pashtun tradition of a loya jirga from which an Afghan ruler nominally derived his authority, the amir set up a national assembly consisting of aristocrats from the royal clan, village notables and landlords, and members of the ulema. Since he had no intention of sharing power, the assembly's role was purely advisory.

Lord Curzon, later to become a formidable viceroy of India, drew a vivid and balanced portrait of the complex and enigmatic 'Iron Amir', whom he visited in 1894 at his winter palace in Peshawar. During his two-week stay as a private guest of the amir, he had long and candid conversations with him that he recorded in his notebooks and later incorporated into a remarkable essay, in a collection that was published in 1923.¹⁵ Curzon assessed him as follows:

In the thirteen years that elapsed before my visit, the Amir had consolidated his rule over one of the most turbulent peoples in the world by force alike of character and of arms, and by a relentless savagery that ended by crushing all opposition out of existence, and leaving him the undisputed but dreaded master of the entire country. No previous Sovereign had ridden the wild Afghan steed with so cruel a bit, none had given so large a measure of unity to the kingdom; there was not in Asia or in the world a more fierce or uncompromising despot. ... [But] this terribly cruel man could be affable, gracious, and considerate to a degree. This man of blood loved scents and colours and gardens and singing birds and flowers. This intensely practical being was a prey to mysticism, for he thought he saw dreams and visions.

The amir was fond of quoting the Persian poet Sa'adi, and had an irrepressible sense of humour. On one occasion, writes Curzon, 'he put a man to death unjustly, i.e. on false evidence. Thereupon he fined himself 6,000 rupees, and paid the sum to the widow, who for her part was delighted at being simultaneously rid of a husband and started again in life.'

CHAPTER 2

The Afghan Monarchy

Abdur Rahman bequeathed a rudimentary national state to his son, Habibullah, who succeeded him in an uncontested transition, unusual in Muslim autocracies that had no laws of primogeniture, so well had his father cowed the potential opposition. The foundations of a state bureaucracy had been laid by Abdur Rahman through his policy of appointing provincial governors and other high officials on the basis of their personal loyalty. The policies of Habibullah, and after his assassination in 1919 of his progressive and modernizing son, Amanullah, created a new form of state bureaucracy, independent of the tribal or ethnic networks of power and authority. This new social group, urban and increasingly westernized with the opening of foreign-language schools in Kabul, occupied a third space, at a further remove from the traditional core of rural society, the local community or *qawm*.

The *qawm* could be the tribe, a clan or sub-clan, or a village, the power wielded by its traditional chiefs or elders being derived by consensus, and dependent on their ability to dispense patronage. The *qawm* was an autonomous and somewhat elusive network of relationships, in the eyes of which the state was an intrusion. This vast rural space is Afghanistan proper, and could be described as a community of interests, local and traditional, which, along with the multi-ethnic composition of the population, inhibited the development of a modern nation-state. The interaction of the competing forces of the state, symbolized by Kabul and its bureaucracy, and the *qawm* would constitute the political history of twentieth-century Afghanistan.

At the village level, the chief or *malik* was chosen by the male heads of families and represented the community to the state. *Maliks* were sometimes coopted by the state to serve as its representatives in the *qawm*. In such cases the *malik's* position became ambiguous. He could thwart the implementation of unpopular measures decreed by the state by taking evasive action, or he could use his official position to strengthen his personal influence and authority outside the traditional consensus. Either way, there was in such arrangements a potential for corruption, not necessarily seen as such by the *qawm*, since the bribing of state officials, tax evasion, complicity in the avoidance of military conscription and the like, were defensive actions of the

traditional rural communities against the unwelcome encroachments of the state.

On a larger canvas, when provinces and districts were demarcated by the state for administrative and military purposes, a local notable or khan, drawn from the class of important landowners or tribal chiefs, could be nominated by the state to act as its representative in an administrative capacity. His authority or influence was also based on the consensus of the qawm, and sanctioned by his liberality and generosity - 'there is no khan without *das-tarkhan*' (eating cloth), goes the Afghan saying. Such an appointment greatly enhanced the khan's capacity to dispense patronage, by drawing on the state's resources to the advantage of his qawm. He could extend his largesse, obtain state appointments and sinecures for relatives and loyal retainers, and so strengthen his own local power and prestige. In such ways, the conservative social structures rooted in the traditional rural communities of Afghanistan were able to infiltrate the state bureaucracy and its institutions and subvert them to their own interests, to maintain and strengthen the local status quo.

Habibullah (1901-19)

Habibullah's contribution to the process of modernization was not substantial, despite his personal fascination for Western technical inventions. He had the four official wives permitted by Islam, as well as 35 concubines, and sired some 50 children. His father had set up workshops with foreign help to manufacture shoes, soap and other articles for his harem and the ladies of the court. He had hired foreign technicians and advisers to assist in introducing new technology in some limited fields, such as mining. Habibullah commissioned an American engineer to build the country's first hydro-electric plant, to supply power to palaces and public buildings in Kabul. To indulge his passion for motor cars, he had a road built. Another of his private interests was Jules Verne, and he engaged a polyglot Afghan intellectual, Mahmud Khan Tarzi, to translate his science fiction into Persian.

Abdur Rahman had kept the traditional religious establishment on a tight leash, depriving it of its economic power or means of political influence, employing the measures described in the last chapter. In attempts to win over religious notables to counter harem intrigues upon his accession, Habibullah relaxed his father's policy, enabling clerics to regain some of their former power, and to influence the amir's decisions.

Habibullah's main contribution was to assert Afghan independence, and to remove the limitations on his country's sovereignty, such as the right of the government of British India to oversee his foreign relations, imposed by the Treaty of Gandamak in 1879. When he informed the viceroy of India, Lord Curzon, of his accession to the throne in 1901, that high-handed

practitioner of the 'forward policy' used the occasion to extract further concessions before recognizing him as amir. With blatant effrontery Curzon replied that the treaty that the British had previously signed was a personal document, and that a new treaty had to be considered. In doing this he was flouting a basic principle of international law that the British, when it suited their purpose, had always insisted on: that treaties were between states, and not between rulers. He also refused the annual British financial subsidy on the same grounds. Habibullah shrewdly concluded that he had therefore no obligations under the existing treaty, and proposed opening diplomatic relations with a number of countries without prior consultations with the viceroy. To the persistent British demands for rail links from Quetta via Kandahar to Kabul, and telegraph links that would have tied his country to British India, and their attempts to restrict the transit through India of arms purchased by the Afghans, Habibullah responded with equal obduracy. He insisted on a new treaty that would acknowledge also his royal and sovereign status as ruler of Afghanistan 'and its dependencies' - the last phrase being a hint that he did not consider the Durand Line as an international frontier. The new agreement was signed in 1905. The arrears of the subsidy, amounting to £40,000, were also paid. Curzon resigned as viceroy later that year, to the applause of Afghan and Indian nationalists, as well as liberals in London.

Habibullah visited India in 1907 as a guest of the new viceroy, the liberal Lord Minto, and was received with due pomp and ceremony; indeed he was taken on the obligatory tiger shoot arranged by the British Raj for visiting dignitaries. He refused, however, to consider the provisions relating to Afghanistan in the St Petersburg Convention of 1907 as binding, on the grounds that his country had not been a party to the treaty.

When the Great War broke out, Habibullah resisted both internal and external pressures to abandon Afghan neutrality. When Ottoman Turkey entered the conflict, the sultan, nominally caliph of the Muslim world, declared a jihad against the 'infidel' Allies. Turkish propaganda conveniently overlooked the fact that the Hashemite guardian of the Islamic holy places, the sherif of Mecca, and his sons, were actively cooperating with the British through agents such as T.E. Lawrence to put an end to the Ottoman occupation of Arab lands in the hope of creating a unified Arab state. Turkey's own allies, Germany and the Habsburg Empire, were also 'infidel' states. These incongruities reached a high level of pantomime when the German kaiser was portrayed in the Turkish press wearing Arab dress and referred to as 'Hajji Wilhelm'.

Habibullah was embarrassed when a Turco-German mission arrived in Kabul in September 1915. They were accompanied by two virulently anti-British Indian nationalists, one a Muslim, the other a Hindu. The mission's objective was to persuade the amir to attack the British in India and the

Russians in Turkestan. Their plans called for the coordination of nationalistic uprisings in India, with simultaneous revolts by Muslims in Central Asia. In return the Germans undertook to provide the amir with a vast quantity of arms, and £20 million sterling in gold. The shrewd amir procrastinated, and began a correspondence with the British in India, indicating that in return for his neutrality they should relinquish their control of Afghanistan's foreign relations. Habibullah did not survive to see this last constraint on Afghan independence removed: he was assassinated during a hunting trip, another of his passions, in February 1919. The identity of his assailants remained a secret, but suitable scapegoats were found and executed.

Amanullah (1919-29)

Amanullah was the first Afghan ruler determined at all costs to pull his nation into the twentieth century. But he lacked the shrewd political sense of his father and grandfather. His clumsy and insensitive efforts to modernize the country came to grief and ended in anarchy. All this despite the fact that he had as a knowledgeable adviser Mahmud Khan Tarzi, one of the most remarkable of early twentieth-century Asian nationalists. It is possible that had Tarzi's advice been followed, Afghan history might have taken a different course.

Tarzi (1865-1933) was born in Ghazni. His father, a grandson of the Amir Dost Mohammad and therefore closely related to the ruling Mohammadzai family, was an eminent poet. Hence his appellation *tarzi* ('stylist' in Persian). The young Tarzi received a classical Persian education based on the study of Arabic and Persian literature, poetry and philosophy. When he was 16 the family was banished because of his father's critical views on the brutality of Abdur Rahman's policies. The family settled in Damascus, where the young Tarzi moved in Arab intellectual circles that had come under the influence of European ideas and values. He also came into contact with the Young Turks who were eventually to overthrow the sultan, following the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire after the Great War, and to establish a secular republic.

Tarzi is inappropriately referred to in the literature as Mahmud Beg (*beg* being the Turkish equivalent of the honorific *khan*, derived from Mongol usage), because of his long stay in Ottoman lands. During his travels he had also come into contact with the Afghan religious reformer and political agitator, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-97). Afghani had been a minister at the court of the Kabul Amir. When his patron was ousted by Sher Ali in 1869, Afghani went on a long odyssey that took him to India and to European capitals, and to Cairo, Tehran and Istanbul, where he enjoyed the patronage of their respective rulers. In Paris he collaborated for a time with

the Egyptian exile, Mohammad Abduh, in the publication of reformist Islamic periodicals that gave birth to the modernizing *salafiyah* - a movement that was to become very influential among modernist intellectuals in some parts of the Muslim world. Abduh eventually broke with Afghani, whose ideas were often contradictory and who was incorrigibly given to political intrigue that was to get him often into trouble with his royal patrons. Abduh, however, was consistent in his efforts to reconcile Islam with the intellectual demands of a rational and scientific modernism that had enabled a dynamic and industrialized Europe to impose its will on vast areas of the Muslim world. His ideas had a special appeal for educated Muslims who wished to modernize their economically and socially backward societies without abandoning their Islamic faith and cultural heritage. One of them was Sir Sayyed Ahmad, who founded the Anglo-Oriental College in Aligarh, India, which exercised a great influence on forward-looking Muslim leaders of the sub-continent. Although his ideas departed in many important respects from the rigid interpretations of the shari'a by the orthodox ulema, Abduh was named Grand Mufti of Egypt on his return from exile, and eventually appointed to the Supreme Council of Al-Azhar University.

At the age of 25 Tarzi wrote his first book, *Travels in Three Continents*, after a tour with his father of Syria, Egypt, Turkey and France. It was purportedly a travelogue, but contained political satire. In the tradition of Montesquieu in his *Lettres persanes*, or of Voltaire who, in the guise of observations on foreign countries based on the accounts of the ubiquitous Jesuit missionaries of his day, obliquely satirized the monarchical and despotic France of the ancien régime, Tarzi used the device of a young Turkish liberal who spoke his mind concerning his experiences of the Ottoman bureaucracy. The manuscript was passed from hand to hand and published in 1915, when it was recognized as a plea for social justice in Muslim countries.

After the death of his father in 1901, Tarzi, as head of the family, obtained permission to visit Kabul to pay his respects to the new amir. Habibullah was impressed by his talents and requested Tarzi to end his family's exile. The family returned to Kabul two years later. Habibullah's son, Amanullah, then married a daughter of Tarzi, the charming Soraya, by his Syrian wife. In Damascus Tarzi had worked in the Ottoman secretariat of the Syrian province. Besides being proficient in Arabic, Persian and Turkish, he had a knowledge of Pashtu, Urdu and French. Habibullah appointed Tarzi to head a bureau of translations, mainly to render into Persian the works of Jules Verne. In 1911 Tarzi began publishing a bi-monthly newspaper, *Seraj-ul-Akhbar*, which became a vehicle for his critical views on imperialism, the need for the modernization of Afghan society, and on the resistance to change of Muslim clerics. His attacks on European imperialism struck chords in British India and in Central Asia. His more oblique criticism of the backward local

scene made him vulnerable, and led to a strained relationship with Habibullah.

When his father was assassinated in 1919, Amanullah established his authority with the support of the army, after a brief revolt by one of his brothers. He then began to launch a series of internal reforms. But his first impulse was nationalistic. Urged on by Tarzi and his leading army generals, and with the support of tribal leaders, Amanullah declared war on the British. In this less-known Third Anglo-Afghan War of May 1919, known to the Afghans as their War of Independence, three Afghan columns marched against British India. One, led by General Nadir Khan, the future ruler, advanced beyond the Durand Line into Parachinar and Thal in the Kurram Tribal Agency of the North West Frontier Province of British India. Tribesmen on both sides of the Line, as well as deserters from the paramilitary British Frontier Scouts, rallied to the Afghan side. But the British brought in a new weapon. Military aircraft of First World War vintage dropped bombs on Kabul and Jalalabad. Both sides then began peace moves.

The initial negotiations for an armistice, to be followed by a peace conference, led to the Treaty of Rawalpindi in August 1919, largely dictated by the British, which left Afghanistan free to conduct its own foreign affairs. But the British concession was ambiguous, and the Afghans hedged their bets by sending a mission to the newly installed Bolsheviks in Moscow in October 1919. This visit had in fact been preceded by a Bolshevik mission to Kabul the previous month to negotiate the status of the still-disputed Pandjeh area in Turkestan, annexed by the czar in 1886, and to obtain Afghan support for the Bolsheviks in Muslim Central Asia in return for assistance against the British.

The Bolsheviks had represented themselves as champions of the colonial subjects of European and czarist imperialism, and held out hopes for their eventual independence. The formulation of a Bolshevik policy towards nationalist movements in colonial countries was discussed extensively in Moscow at the Second Congress of the Communist International (Comintern) in July–August 1920. The position taken by Lenin at the Congress was that the bourgeois nationalist stage must be passed before entering the stage of proletarian revolution. It was therefore the duty of communist parties to assist bourgeois-nationalist liberation movements in their struggle against imperialism, and even to form alliances with such movements. This was to define Soviet attitudes towards the national revolutions then taking shape in Ataturk's Turkey, Reza Shah's Iran, Amanullah's Afghanistan and Sun Yat Sen's China.

In September a Congress of Peoples of the East held in Baku brought together an array of Asian leftist revolutionaries from the Dutch East Indies to British India, to discuss the 'National and Colonial Question'. The Bengali

communist M.N. Roy, with a more sceptical eye on his native India, took a radical view. He maintained that the nationalist bourgeoisie were essentially reactionary in character, and that the priority was to build up communist parties to organize the peasants and the workers, lead them to revolt against the bourgeoisie, and set up Soviet-style republics. The Congress in Baku appeared to have reached a compromise, but it was in fact Lenin's thesis that became the basis of Soviet theory and practice with regard to colonial peoples and territories until the dismantling of the Soviet Union itself.¹

One of the Comintern's avowed objectives was to bring about the liberation of colonial peoples. The Comintern became in fact an instrument of Soviet foreign policy, later exploited with his habitual lack of scruple by Stalin, with the collusion of the nascent communist parties of Asia. In the meantime the Bolsheviks were reconquering Central Asia. Freed from their efforts in repressing anti-Bolshevik forces elsewhere in the former czarist empire, Red Army troops put an end in 1924 to the autonomy of the khanates of Khiva and Bokhara in Russian Turkestan. The Muslim resistance fighters called *basmachis* ('bandits' in Russian) were eventually defeated, with large groups of Turcomen, Uzbek, Tajik and Kirghiz fighters seeking refuge in northern Afghanistan with their families, thus significantly increasing the numbers of these ethnic groups in the north. Amanullah was sympathetic but powerless in the face of their pleas for help, caught as he was between his grandfather's 'millstones'.

On the domestic front, Amanullah's well-intentioned but unsubtle efforts, aimed at the wholesale transformation of an anachronistic society into a modern and secular state, were unsuccessful, and cost him his throne. In 1919 he had established a council of ministers, appointing Tarzi as the first foreign minister in Afghan history. In 1923 a constitution, modelled on the Persian constitution of 1906 and inspired also by the modernizing decrees of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, was promulgated. The amir himself assumed the title of *padshah* (king) and made the office hereditary. Under pressure from conservative religious and tribal leaders, Amanullah was obliged to call the traditional *loya jirga* to review the constitution, and to amend some of its provisions, particularly those that restricted the wide discretionary powers of the religious judges (*qazi*).

Amanullah then began to decree a series of administrative, economic, social and educational reforms. His plans for the emancipation of women, compulsory education for all and coeducational schools angered the religious conservatives. In 1924 the unruly Mangal Pashtun tribesmen of Khost were stirred to revolt by a fanatical cleric called the Mullah-i-Lang. The rebellion was crushed a year later, but it was an ominous sign. Tarzi resigned in 1925, his advice on the need to proceed slowly and cautiously in the reform programme having been repeatedly ignored by Amanullah.

Meanwhile Amanullah's grandiose projects to turn Kabul into the capital of a modern kingdom bankrupted the treasury. Many projects were left unfinished. In 1927 he embarked on a grand tour of European capitals where he was dazzled by the achievements of the West. In Cairo he startled worshippers at a mosque by appearing in European dress complete with top hat. Amanullah also visited Turkey and Persia on his return journey, and was the first foreign ruler to visit the Soviet Union.

The architect of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, was sweeping away the centuries-old bureaucratic and religious resistance to change and forging a secular Turkish nation. Ataturk had warned Amanullah that no large-scale programme of political and social reform could be initiated without a strong and well-trained army, and a loyal and disciplined bureaucracy. In Persia Ataturk's example was followed by Reza Khan, a Russian-trained former Cossack officer who had overthrown the decadent and decrepit Qajar dynasty in 1925, and begun the forcible modernization of a tradition-bound society. Women were forbidden to wear the veil (*chador*), just as Ataturk had abolished the fez. Men were ordered to wear wide-brimmed hats, 'a device that was singularly designed to obstruct the rituals of Muslim prayer', as one writer said. Reza Shah had at his command a strong army and a subservient, centralized bureaucracy.

While Amanullah was making his grand tour, photographs of Queen Soraya, unveiled and wearing evening dress at European state receptions, were circulated in Afghanistan, arousing the wrath of the mullahs. The unveiling of Soraya in Europe provoked, it was reported, this reaction in Afghanistan: 'The King had turned against Allah and Islam.' He was also reported to be bringing back from Europe 'machines to make soap out of corpses'.²

After his return to Kabul in July 1928 Amanullah announced a series of reforms before a *loya jirga* composed of the country's leading tribal and religious leaders. He called for (a) the establishment of a Western-style constitutional monarchy, a cabinet of ministers, an elected lower house, and a nominated upper house (so far so good, except that such concepts would have been incomprehensible to the tribal and religious members of the *loya jirga*); (b) the separation of religious and state power - a perennially prickly issue in Muslim countries, as will be examined later; and (c) the emancipation of women, enforced monogamy, compulsory education for all, and coeducational schools. Had these proposed reforms been implemented, they would have cut into the very roots of conservative society in predominantly rural Afghanistan.

The *loya jirga* (itself a very ancient version of direct democracy, somewhat similar to the traditional *landesgemeinde* of the older Swiss-German cantons) rejected most of Amanullah's proposals. The king then convened a smaller

loya jirga composed of loyalists, to approve those proposals that had been rejected, including the abolition of the *chadari* (veil). The wife of the British Minister in Kabul who was present on the occasion, wrote in her diary: 'The most dramatic moment of all was when Amanullah wound up an impassioned appeal to his people to free their women with a wave of his hand towards his Queen, saying, "Anyway, you may see my wife", and she pulled down her veil before the assembled multitude.'³

The writing was on the wall. In November 1928 Shinwari Pashtun tribesmen burned down the king's winter palace in Jalalabad – and for good measure, the British consulate – and marched on Kabul. In the north, a Tajik bandit known as Bacha Saqqao ('son of a water carrier') assembled a rag-tag force in the defence of Islam and marched on Kabul, forcing Amanullah to flee to safety in Kandahar, and to eventual exile in Italy. Amanullah had abdicated in favour of his elder brother, Inayatullah, who lasted three days before Bacha Saqqao and his ragged followers arrived in Kabul and subjected the city and its hapless inhabitants to a nine-month reign of terror. The looting, pillaging and arson, and the rapes perpetrated by the wild invaders, alienated even those religious leaders opposed to Amanullah, such as the influential Hazrat of Shor Bazar, the head of the Mujaddidi family and of the ancient Naqshbandiya Sufi order, who had first acclaimed the bandit as the 'Holy Warrior, Habibullah, Servant of the Faith'.

Armed opposition to Bacha Saqqao coalesced around two leaders. One was Ghulam Nabi Charki, the ambassador to Moscow, who with Soviet backing assembled a mercenary force from both sides of the northern border to march on Kabul and restore Amanullah. The other was the hero of the Third Anglo-Afghan War, General Nadir Khan, a member of the powerful Musahiban family from a collateral branch of the royal clan.⁴ With the help of his four brothers and a tribal army assembled from both sides of the Durand Line (with the tacit collusion of the British it appears), Nadir Khan defeated the bandit forces and occupied Kabul in October 1929. Bacha Saqqao surrendered, but despite a pledge to spare his life and a promise of safe passage signed on a copy of the Koran by the victorious general, he was publicly hanged with his leading followers a month later.

Nadir Shah (1929–33)

Nadir Khan was proclaimed king by his tribal army. To legitimize his succession in the traditional Pashtun manner, he convened a loya jirga in September 1930 that proclaimed him king as Nadir Shah. The new king was a man of action. His first task was to bring the country firmly under his authority, carrying out measures ranging from conciliation to outright brutality, as in his handling of rebellious Tajiks in the north-east. He built up a

regular army of 40,000 men. This replaced the tribal levies he had used to defeat Bacha Saqqao, but who in their turn had sacked Kabul in lieu of pay, a victory seen traditionally, as in the Arab *razzia*, as an invitation to loot. Nadir Shah replenished the treasury by collecting taxes with military efficiency. He built a road across the high treacherous passes of the Hindu Kush⁵ that for the first time gave relatively easy access to northern Afghanistan, before the Soviets built the Salang Tunnel. He opened up the economy to private enterprise, giving great impetus to the development of a laissez-faire economy that thrived until the communist putsch in 1978. He coerced entrepreneurs to use their capital to drain the malarial swamps of the north and turn them into productive land.

Nadir Shah promulgated a new constitution in 1931 that, while containing some human rights provisions to satisfy the liberal sentiments of the pro-Amanullah faction, was in fact a reactionary document perpetuating the status quo ante, an autocratic monarchy allied to religious conservatism. His cabinet consisted of his brothers and other relatives. The government was in principle made responsible to a National Council selected from among its members by the *loya jirga* that had proclaimed him king in 1930. However, not only had the members of the council been vetted by the king before their selection, they also had to declare in advance their loyalty to the government.

The first article of the 1931 constitution decreed officially, and for the first time, that the religious law of the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam was the law of Afghanistan. In further acknowledgement of the power of religious leaders who had brought about the downfall of Amanullah, the king coopted them into the power structure by putting mosque imams on the government payroll, appointing relatives of influential religious figures such as the Hazrat of Shor Bazar to lucrative posts, and by establishing a special board of ulema to ensure that what was taught in schools conformed to Islamic values – an open-ended mandate that permitted the religious establishment to denounce whatever they disapproved of as ‘un-Islamic’.

In November 1933 the king was shot dead by a high-school student in Kabul. The assassination may have been in settlement of a blood feud. The young cadet was the adopted son of General Ghulam Nabi Charki, who had been beaten to death the previous year by soldiers on the orders of Nadir Shah after an angry confrontation with the king at his palace. The Charki family were pro-Amanullah, anti-British, and avowed opponents of the king, whom they accused of being a man without honour who had usurped the throne from the grandson of Abdur Rahman. The Charki father had been one of the Iron Amir’s favourite generals. A month before the king met his end, another Charki brother had been executed for his alleged part in an attack on the British Legation. The attack was carried out by a nationalist

schoolteacher who confessed that his intention had been to kill the British Minister, force the British to interfere, and overthrow Nadir Shah.

Anti-British sentiment also appeared to be the motive for the assassination in Berlin the previous June of the Afghan Minister there, Mohammad Aziz, an elder brother of the king. Some observers linked the murder to the Charki–Musahiban feud. But there was also a perception that Nadir Shah leaned towards the British who, as was noted earlier, had allowed his passage through India and turned a blind eye to his mobilization of a tribal army from both sides of the Durand Line on his march to Kabul to overthrow Bacha Saqqao. The British had also granted him £170,000 on his assumption of power to enable his government to tide over the financial crisis resulting from Amanullah's extravagance.

It is of interest to note that the king's assassin, his brother's assassin in Berlin, as well as the school teacher who had attacked the British Legation, were all former students of the Amaniah School in Kabul founded by Amanullah (renamed the Najat or 'redemption' school by Nadir Shah). A clandestine irredentist movement committed to the return of Pashtun territory across the Durand Line also consisted of former students. In the years to come, students of such state schools in Kabul and in the principal towns coalesced into a new force in Afghan society – nationalistic, revolutionary, and alienated from the traditional spaces occupied by court, khan, qawm, malik and mullah.

This new force was never very numerous relative to the population. A modern school system had come late to Afghanistan. Students were sent abroad for the first time during Amanullah's reign. They were drawn from the wealthier families and were to become a forward-looking, modernizing elite, staffing the Kabul bureaucracy and the University after the Second World War. Due to the lack of qualified Afghans, the local foreign-language and other state schools were staffed by German, French and Indian teachers from whom the students could have imbibed subversive Western ideas. Nor were the students exposed to foreign influences a homogenous group.

The first institute of higher education, the Faculty of Medicine, which became the core of the future University of Kabul, was established in 1932. The University was to become a confused hotbed of dissent in the 1950s and 1960s, spawning liberals and progressives of all hues, including Marxists and outright atheists, as well as Islamists and other Muslim radicals. If there was one experience they had in common, it was that they were outsiders from underprivileged groups and minorities who felt that they had no place in the traditional establishment. Through their education they became a kind of middle class in a socially backward pre-industrial country that lacked a true middle class, and with no economic opportunities for such a class outside the limited confines of the state bureaucracy and army. They were to come into

their own in the 1960s and 1970s. But as the blinkered slaves of imported ideologies, they invited unprecedented disaster.

Zahir Shah (1933–73)

The long reign of the French-educated Zahir Shah that began when he was 19 years old is aptly called 'the avuncular period' by Louis Dupree. Zahir Shah reigned, but his father's brothers governed. The elimination of the Charki family as a focus of serious opposition had ensured a stable transition, and the first 20 years of the Zahir Shah era were relatively peaceful on the domestic front. The king's uncle, Hashim Khan, who had been appointed prime minister in 1929, continued in that capacity until 1946, when he was replaced by his youngest brother, Shah Mahmud. In 1953 the latter was ousted in a palace revolution in which the king's cousin, who was also his brother-in-law, Sardar Daoud Khan, became prime minister.

The Second World War brought with it a challenge in the sphere of the government's foreign relations. Before the war, the Afghans had accepted economic assistance only from countries that were geographically remote enough (like Germany, Italy and Japan but not Britain and Russia) not to be able to influence their political independence. In 1936 the German government loaned DM 27 million in return for the purchase of arms. German advisers and technicians prospected for minerals and, with the Italians and Japanese, carried out irrigation projects. On the eve of the war the German presence was substantial.

In August 1940 Afghanistan, which had been admitted to the League of Nations in 1934, formally reaffirmed its neutrality. In October 1941 the British and the Soviets demanded the expulsion from Afghan soil of all citizens of the three Axis countries. A similar joint ultimatum to the Iranians, who had been slow to respond, had resulted in the invasion and partial occupation of Iran by British and Soviet forces in August 1941, and the forced abdication of Reza Shah who was replaced by his young son. There was of course more at stake in Iran: German agents had been very active there, Iranian oil was a precious resource for the Allies, and, with most of Europe occupied by the Nazis, a southern route to supply the beleaguered Soviets was a strategic necessity. But the Afghans considered the ultimatum an affront to their declared neutrality and to their traditional laws of hospitality. Some hotheads called for defiance, even war. In the end, a characteristic Afghan solution was found: the non-diplomatic personnel of all the belligerent nations were expelled.

When Shah Mahmud became prime minister in 1946, one of his first acts was to release political prisoners. There were other modest attempts to liberalize the regime, leading to the election in 1949 of a parliament in which

some 40 per cent of the 120 members were educated, reform-minded Afghans who took their parliamentary duties seriously. According to the 1931 constitution, government ministers were in principle responsible to parliament for the policies of the government in general and of the ministries under their charge in particular. Ministry budgets had become a notorious source of graft and influence-peddling. Now when ministers were queried on their individual budgets, they sought refuge behind other provisions of the constitution that appeared to give parliament no jurisdiction over such matters.

However, the so-called 'liberal parliament' did open some windows. The enactment of laws permitting freedom of the press led to the appearance of newspapers and other publications whose favourite targets became the ruling family oligarchy and conservative religious leaders. A student union was formed at Kabul University that became a forum for free-wheeling debates and attacks on the status quo. A loosely organized political association called the Movement of Enlightened Youth also made its appearance during this period. Middle-class in origin and liberal in spirit, its manifesto called for the eradication of anachronistic customs and ideas, the grant of legal rights to women, the accountability of the government to parliament, the eradication of official corruption, the formation of political parties, economic development, and so on.

Such demands, it must be said, gave voice to a small minority of educated and reform-minded Afghans in urban areas, but found no resonance in the unlettered general population, subject to the traditional influences of malik and mullah, responsive only to the local concerns of their particular qawm, and utterly impervious to the secular issues that lay behind these demands. Thus, when the increasingly vocal opposition was perceived as a threat to the ruling oligarchy and the traditional vested interests, the government had no difficulty in clamping down on the reformists and imprisoning some of their more articulate elements. Samuel P. Huntington's comment is apt: 'Power which is sufficiently concentrated to promote reforms may be too concentrated to assimilate the social forces released by them.'⁶ In the context of Afghanistan, the policies of Abdur Rahman, which allowed no uncontrollable social forces to be released, may have been vindicated. This problem is also faced by every autocratic regime, Pahlavi Iran and the Soviet Union being the most spectacular examples.