



THE 1897 REVOLT AND TIRAH VALLEY OPERATIONS FROM THE PASHTUN PERSPECTIVE

by Robert A. Johnson

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*We know that the general object of the expedition [in 1897] launched by us against the Afridis and the Orakzais was to exact reparation for their unprovoked aggression on the Peshawar-Kohat border, [and] for their attacks on our frontier posts ... But that is only our view of the matter. We want to get behind this, and ascertain the Afridi view. Why did they, who had faithfully kept their agreements with us for sixteen long years, why did they rise against us, and commit these outrages? Were they altogether 'unprovoked' as we so confidently assert?'*¹

Military operations by the Pakistan Army and by the Western Coalition astride the Pashtun mountain belt since 2001 have led naturally to a greater interest in the history of conflict in the region. The difficulty in defeating the neo-Taliban insurgency has compelled the Western armed forces to investigate the socio-cultural aspects of their adversaries. However, one of the immediate problems in this regard is that almost all the prominent historical sources are written from a Western perspective. The paucity or absence of written records from the Pashtun side, certainly until very recent times, has meant that analysts are deprived of the crucial element: what the Pashtuns were thinking when they conducted their operations. Much, of course, has been written on Islamic Jihadism and there is now an increasing body of literature on the Pashtuns, but there is still preciously little on the history of military operations in the region in the British period, and, amongst those volumes, Pashtun perspectives are episodic and infrequent.²

The largest and most serious outbreak of fighting on the North West Frontier during the colonial era was the Pathan Uprising of 1897-8. The revolt was actually a series of local insurrections involving over 200,000 fighters, including Afghan volunteers, and it required over 59,000 regular troops and 4,000 Imperial Service Troops to deal with it; the largest deployment in India since the Mutiny-Rebellion of 1857-8.³ Its outbreak proved such an unexpected and significant shock to the British that they conducted detailed enquiries after the event. Various explanations were offered but it is generally accepted that recent encroachments into tribal territory, with fears that the British meant to permanently occupy the region as a prelude to the destruction of their independence and way of life, led to the initial fighting. There were other contributory factors: a perception that the Amir of Afghanistan, Abdur Rahman Khan, would support an anti-British Jihad; rumours that the Christian Greeks had been defeated by the Muslim Turks and that the Christian world was finally in retreat, and local anxieties about women, money-lenders and road-building.⁴ This analysis on the causes, whilst important, has not been extended to the actual conduct of operations. British accounts of the period tend to narrate and scrutinise British manoeuvres, leaving the Pashtuns as forces either incapable of strategic thinking or reactive to British decisions. Almost universally, however, British accounts remarked on the tactical skill of the Pashtun fighters and their great courage despite severe losses. A few accounts were even prepared to acknowledge that the Pashtuns had adapted their fighting techniques to take advantage of British operational procedures and that a few recent ex-Indian Army Pashtuns had returned to the hills to implement British tactics. Captain Nevill, an analyst of the North West Frontier Campaigns, concluded:

1. Colonel H.D. Hutchinson, *The Campaign in Tirah, 1897-98* (London, 1898), p.1.

2. Without doubt the best analysis of the operations on the North West Frontier from the British perspective is T.R. Moreman, *The Army in India and the Development of Frontier Warfare, 1849-1947* (London: Macmillan, 1998). See especially Chapters 2 and 3.

3. K.M.L. Saxena, *The Military System of India, 1859-1900* (New Delhi, 1974), pp.268-9.

4. A.K. Slessor, 'Why and How the Afridis Rose', [*Colburn's*] *United Services Magazine*, 20, (1899-1900), pp.388-400.

*The Afridis are essentially a fighting race; ... we have little to teach them in the tactics best suited to their conditions of organisation and terrain. It is only in the higher branches of the art of war – the domain of strategy rather than tactics – that they have much to learn. ... Lack of organisation has always been the keynote of those guerrilla tactics which have baffled again and again the armies of civilised nations.*⁵

James Belich's study of the New Zealand Wars provides us with a possible framework to recover the Pashtun perspective in the campaigns along the frontier.⁶ Belich argued that British sources tended to stereotype the Maori in such a way that had deprived them of any tactical or strategic sense and instead emphasised certain attributes such as determination, savagery and elusiveness.⁷ He studied the British sources and written accounts by settlers to piece together the Maori approach to war. Whilst critics might challenge the conclusiveness of his analysis, there is no doubt that his work offered a chance to reclaim the Maori perspective and therefore create a far more rounded understanding of the decision-making on both sides.

The problem of interpreting the actions of those who fought the colonial powers, but who had little or no written records, has led to greater interest in oral tradition. This has its merits of course, but historians remain sceptical of its value, especially when events experienced by people several generations ago are collected. It can sometimes reveal a deep-seated sense of grievance, wrapped into the cultural metaphors of the society in question, but there is often the risk that events of great antiquity and recent memory flow together and are constantly re-interpreted by each generation. Post-colonial scholars have also attempted to recover the 'silenced subalterns' of empire by offering their own interpretations which strip away Western assumptions and conceptions. Ranajit Guha's introduction to the first volume of *Subaltern Studies* criticised the emphasis of 'elitist histories' on the intelligentsia and the idea that the masses had responded along 'vertical lines' of command rather than possessing any agency of their own.⁸ Certainly it would seem sensible to assess the degree to which the often highly democratised and fragmented Pashtun groups acted independently of their 'leaders', but, equally, it would be just as crucial to keep in mind the part played by charismatic leadership, not least from influential religious figures.

Some more recent post-colonial scholars are so concerned to remove the 'taint of colonialism' in their analyses, that they have suggested myths should take the place of 'empiricism' as *the* history of those peoples as they see it. Edward Said's work pointed to European constructions of the Asians which were so pervasive as to render them subordinate, and it was evident that he railed against the racist stereotypes of the colonial era that had, unwittingly or not, continued into modern analyses.⁹ Critics of Said's work demonstrated that there were several flaws in his polemic, and the very existence of the Pashtun resistance, spread over many decades, suggests that, for all the stereotypes the British invented, there was no question of this being a substitute for actual occupation and subordination.¹⁰ Indeed, despite the assertions that British Orientalist assumptions were largely myths, there could be no escaping the fact that other groups from the sub-continent also described the Pashtuns in similarly stereotyped terms. The Orientalist debate turned from the polarities of constructive 'discourses' about the 'Other' to embrace the idea of dialogues, and the interpenetration of assumptions, knowledge and ideas. By studying a wider range of material, it was thought we might gain a better understanding of the colonials and their subjects, and this might therefore include the narratives, stories and myths of the frontier generated by the Pashtuns.¹¹ Historians, with

5. Captain H.L. Nevill, *Campaigns on the North West Frontier* (London, 1912), pp.275-6.

6. James Belich, *The New Zealand Wars and the Victorian Interpretation of Racial Conflict* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1987).

7. Belich, see chapter 1, pp.102-103, 107.

8. Ranajit Guha, *Subaltern Studies, I*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), p.3.

9. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978).

10. P. O'Hanlon and D. Washbrook, 'After Orientalism: Culture, Criticism and Politics in the Third World', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34, 1, (1992), pp.141-67; Robert Johnson, *British Imperialism: Histories and Controversies* (London: Palgrave, 2003), pp.91-106.

11. David B. Edwards, 'Mad Mullahs and Englishmen: Discourse in the Colonial Encounter', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 31, 4, (October 1989): 649-70.

their imperative for the empirical, have been circumspect. Myths are not a substitute for what Leopold von Ranke called the past ‘*wie es eigentlich gewesen*’ (essentially as it happened); they may augment our understanding of the world-view of those that confronted the Europeans, but they do not give us the rendering of strategy or tactical decision-making that would satisfy a rigorous analysis.

It is clear from the letters of leading Pashtun participants which do survive that, as so often in history, it is not so much what happened as what people *believed* was happening, which matters most. A letter from Kazi Mira Khan (representing the Adam Khel Afridis’ *Jirga*) to Mullah Said Akbar of the Aka Khel clan on 28th Jamadi-ul-Awal 1315AH (25 October 1897) noted reports that had come via Kabul to the effect that Aden, the British coaling station, and the Suez Canal had been seized by the Ottoman Sultan. This meant that it would take the British ‘six months to send reinforcements to India’. The letter continued:

The Sultan, the Germans, the Russians and the French are all in arms against the British at all seaports and fighting is going on in Egypt too against them. In short the British are disheartened nowadays ... British troops are required in Egypt and other seaports. ...In the case of the Mohmands and the peoples of Ghandab, who had killed ten thousand British troops and had inflicted a heavy loss of rifles and property on them, the British, in their great dismay, concluded a settlement with them for 24 rifles only... when the British get rid of their other difficulties they will turn back and demand from the Mohmands their remaining rifles and compensation for their losses,... I have thus informed you of the deeds and perplexities of the English.¹²

This single letter hints at local interpretations of international events and one detects the British concerns with the recent Franco-Russian Alliance in 1894 and the spat with Germany over the Kruger Telegram in 1896. Belich offers a functional alternative to the oral tradition that utilises just this sort of collection of British and indigenous documents. The re-examination of British sources to reconstruct the movements, actions, and comments of the Pashtuns may give some idea of their strategy, although it must be said that this can in no way constitute a definitive and conclusive solution to the absence of sources.

There are also the approaches of other disciplines that can help to illuminate the Pashtun perspective. Political anthropology, for example, examines both power and culture, and the role played by ideology, symbols and organisations. Comaroff and Comaroff argue that it is not just the narrative which emerges from the participants which matters, but the context of that narrative.¹³ They have to be ‘situated in the wider worlds of power and meaning’. For decades Fredrick Barth’s anthropological study of the fragmented and feuding Swat Pathans and his description of the tribal code of *Pashtunwali* stood as the definitive study of all Pathans.¹⁴ However, there were several assumptions in Barth’s work which have subsequently been challenged. The idea that in Pashtun society there was widespread feuding was, in fact, the result of specific land arrangements implemented by the British which led to a particular peak in internal unrest. His analysis seemed to suggest that feuding was endemic and that the tribal code, with its polarising demands for *melmastia* (hospitality to strangers and, as *nanawatai*, to fugitives), the preservation of personal *nang* (honour) and *badal* (revenge against all enemies), was immutable. Akbar Ahmed, whilst critical of Barth’s assumption that the Swat Pathans were typical of the entire mountain region, nevertheless repeated his assertion that the martial tradition and predilection for embracing Jihad were unchanging Pashtun attributes.¹⁵ He also perhaps rather overstated the case that Islamic unity and tribal cohesion could overcome the sort of Hobbesian anarchy that Barth had portrayed.

12. ‘The Correspondence of the Mullahs’, in Colonel H.D. Hutchinson, *The Campaign in Tirah, 1897-98* (London, 1898), pp.124-5.

13. J. Comaroff and J. Comaroff, *Ethnography and Historical Imagination* (Boulder: Westview, 1992) p.17.

14. F. Barth, *Political Leadership Among Swat Pathans* (London: Athlone, 1959).

15. Akbar S. Ahmed, *Millennium and Charisma among Pathans: A Critical Essay in Social Anthropology* (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1976)

David Edwards' study of the Pashtuns during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s suggested a far more selective use of the tribal code.¹⁶ Rather than compelling action, it acted as a guide to assess and react to changing situations in particular ways. The code itself was therefore subject to constant re-interpretation depending on the nature of each crisis.¹⁷ This code was also balanced against the demands of Islam, and the particular understanding of the faith by largely illiterate tribesmen. Religious teachers frequently acted as the translators of religious injunctions but also initiated them. The response of the Pashtun population was, however, far from certain: mullahs sometimes found that their calls for action or neutrality were not heeded. Village *jirgas* (councils) might decide that it was simply not prudent to follow a particular mullah's advice and they would deploy their own references to Islamic injunctions to serve their purpose. Moreover, whilst the *ulema* (a socio-religious elite) might be accorded respect in legal matters, in the settlement of disputes or moral questions, village imams and mullahs had far less influence.¹⁸ Generational differences could play their part just as strongly. Young men, without employment and in need of the opportunity to prove their worth as fighters for the sake of personal honour would carry out raids and ambushes in defiance of the local elders. In other words, the Pashtuns did not adhere to a rigid system but lived and negotiated through the code and their personal or collective circumstances. Capable of unity in the face of an external threat, or the combination of enemies from rival clans, lineage or family, they were just as likely to abandon the alliance as soon as circumstances changed. Although responsive to the call for the armed defence of Islam, they might abandon any struggle if it was more pragmatic to do so. Moreover, whilst old men counselled one course of action, the younger generations might equally pursue their own agendas.

The idea of a dynamic within tribal society continues to be the case in Pashtun-dominated regions of Afghanistan where decades of civil war have sliced through and disrupted older hierarchies, social and political jurisdictions, and land claims. This notion of a dynamic tribal culture certainly appears to offer a far more satisfactory explanation for the actions of the tribesmen of the North West Frontier during one of the most serious episodes of unrest in the 1890s.

However, there is another caveat. Decisions and actions were not only the result of dynamics within tribal societies, but also of reactions to external influences. Unity could be forged by an alien threat. Language, a segmentary structure and acephalous organisation, endogamous marriage rules and egalitarianism could help the coherence of the tribes in the sense that all understood and endorsed this particular way of life and defined themselves with reference to the difference of outsiders. Moreover, groups and families make frequent reference to a patrilineal descent and the suffix of *-zai* (family) or *khel* (clan). The oldest groups might be able to trace their ancestry back generations, and these connections could form the basis of a temporary alliance. The *parajamba* (taking sides) in disputes within Pashtun society might involve a calculation of one's proximity, from a lineage point of view, of the protagonists. The process was so common that it was termed *tarburwali* (conflict between first cousins). One British officer recalled how shooting could break out within a village, but after a few had been killed or wounded and the ammunition exhausted, 'a quarrel could be settled by an interchange of marriages'.¹⁹ Groups conjoined by intermarriage between lineages were styled *quom*, and decisions about these, in common with all other clans, sections and families had also to be calculated against a system of prestige. Refusing a challenge or failure to respond to an insult would reduce the individual's prestige or *nang*. Accepting challenges or proactively seeking to enhance one's prestige increased the individual's and the clan's social standing. Making war on the British was, of course, far more clear cut since they were regarded as alien in clan terms, infidel in their religion and without prestige as a consequence of their frontier policy.

16. David Edwards, 'Pretexts of Rebellion: the Cultural Origins of Pakhtun Resistance to the Afghan State', unpubl. PhD thesis, University of Michigan, 1986.

17. Mukulika Banerjee was also able to show through her study of the Khudai Kitmatgars that such responses were not always military: M. Banerjee, *The Pathan Unarmed* (Karachi and Delhi, 2000).

18. S.W.A. Shah, *Ethnicity, Islam and Nationalism: Muslim Politics in the North West Frontier Province 1937-47* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp.10-11.

19. Hutchinson, *Tirah*, p.129.

The key issue for the Pashtuns was that the occupation of any of their lands constituted a direct threat to their way of life, and they believed the British had deliberately and consistently eroded their honour. For generations after the Pashtuns had occupied their mountain region, land was periodically redistributed to the *daftari* (shareholders) in a process known as *wesh*. Considerable tracts were initially exchanged requiring some nomadism between sections. The exchange of land also served to reinforce the *pashtunwali* code, since it ensured that each tribesman had the means, along with women and weapons, to sustain his personal honour.²⁰ By contrast, *faqirs*, former prisoners, servants, the dispossessed, and non-Pashtun artisans could not compete as *daftari* nor participate in *jirgas*. Yet, the Pashtuns did not have habitual leaders; even men of influence rarely possessed any authority beyond the immediate issues presented at the *jirgas*. The only exception might be those that could demonstrate a consistent piety in their religious devotions and deeds. Before British rule, the system of *wesh* and *nang* was already under threat. The centralisation of the Mughals and then the Kabuli monarchs meant that tributes and revenues were extracted. Landowning and the possession of private property further challenged the tribal system. However, several decades after the British had taken control of the Punjab, the more efficient extraction of land revenue, the jurisdiction of their courts and the rise of the land owners still affected only the margins of tribal territory. The changes imposed on the Settled Districts (areas within the British ‘Administrative Border’ from 1849) nevertheless caused considerable anxiety amongst the tribesmen of the frontier region. Permanent private landowning directly challenged the notion of land exchanges. Money lenders, many of them Hindus, and unscrupulous land speculators or *Arbabs* (middle men) represented the unworthy to the Pashtuns, and yet it was these very people who seemed to profit from rising land values at the expense of Pashtuns on the margins. When the British built fortifications and roads along the edge of tribal lands, it seemed to be only a matter of time before they imposed their rule throughout the region, and, when they did, they would be depriving the tribesmen of the ability to assert their *nang* and perhaps of being a Pashtun at all.

For the British, it made sense to create a landowning class to provide a leadership to do business with and to lead the tribesmen into less ‘criminal’ activity. Settled and wealthy landowners had a stake in the Raj and shared its interests in terms of stability and order. Smaller landowners, who aspired to share the prestige of the larger landowners, also collaborated willingly. When faced by feuding and raids, the British put pressure on the *jirgas* of the Settled Districts to produce far more draconian and punitive sentences than the traditional, more ambiguous assemblies had done. An increase in population put more pressure on the land, whilst rising rents and prices towards the end of the century increased the tension between families and clans, and increased disaffection with British influence. There was still more anger at the British habit of paying ‘political pensions’ for the continued loyalty of certain landowners. Both the British and these ‘sub-imperialists’ assumed they could exercise some control over the clans of the settled areas. In the hills, Political Agents were despatched to create communication channels and to exercise some supervision, but, whilst these agents were generally treated with respect, they nevertheless represented another step towards direct colonial rule.

British Frontier Policy 1890-1897

The British were concerned through much of the nineteenth century by the Russian threat towards India.²¹ Despite the considerable distances, mountain ranges and deserts between Tsarist Central Asia and the Sub-continent, the gradual annexation of the ancient khanates of Turkestan and

20. D. Edwards, ‘Pretexts of Rebellion: The Cultural Origins of Pakhtun Resistance to the Afghan State’, unpubld PhD thesis, University of Michigan (1986), p.75.

21. The contemporary view of the military threat to India was exemplified by Major General Sir C.M MacGregor’s *The Defence of India: A Strategic Study* (Simla, 1884). The Russian view can be found in V.I. Bovykin, *Ocherki istoriivneshnei politiki Rossii (Essays in the History of Russia’s Foreign Policy)* (Moscow, 1960). See also E.L. Steinberg, ‘Angliiskikaia versiia o “russkoi ugroze” Indii v XIX-XX v.v.’ (*The English Version of the “Russian Threat” to India*), *IZ* 33 (1950): 47-66. The most prominent scholarship on the question of the Russian threat includes D. R. Gilliard, *The Struggle for Asia 1828-1914* (London, 1977); Edward Ingram, *The Beginnings of the Great Game in Asia, 1828-34* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); M. Yapp, *Strategies of British India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980); G.J. Alder, *British India’s Northern Frontier, 1865-1895* (London, 1963) and A.P. Thornton, ‘The Reopening of the Central Asian Question’, *Historical Journal* (1956):123-136.

Trans-Caspia brought the Russians to the borders of Afghanistan. The British were anxious that if the Afghans were also annexed or won over then this would give the Russians an opportunity to bring to bear their vast land forces at any point on a long continental frontier. Twice in the nineteenth century the British had occupied Afghanistan, but the expeditions proved too costly and were too strongly resisted to be made permanent. Instead, Britain agreed to act as the guarantor of Afghanistan's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and controlled its foreign policy. Nevertheless, in 1885 and in 1893, the Russian army clashed with the Afghans and compelled the British to clarify the delineation of Afghanistan's borders. Despite the Amir's reluctance to 'risk losing an arm' by taking responsibility for Wakhan, he was persuaded to accept this outlying district so as to give the British a narrow strip of territory between their own and the Russian possessions.²² Nevertheless, the Government of India also felt it necessary to establish more influence and control over the strategic parts of the border. Gilgit and Chitral were furnished with listening posts, auxiliary Imperial Service Troops and supervisory British Political Officers.²³ The Khyber Pass and the Kurram Valley also had garrisons made up of local troops, whilst road building projects were initiated in Waziristan and Dir to make it easier to move troops into any threatened district. These arrangements were part of the Forward Policy, designed to make the tribal areas, which stood astride potential lines of communication into Afghanistan, more secure. Military planners expected to have to race for the Hindu Kush passes inside Afghanistan if war with Russia seemed imminent, and that meant that the vulnerable supply routes had to be secured in advance.²⁴ The wide tribal belt on the Afghan-British Indian frontier owed little allegiance to either Kabul or Delhi, although historically Afghan monarchs had claimed the area as their own. In 1893, the British therefore negotiated the Durand Line as the definitive border. The Afghan Amir clearly felt that parts of the line, if not the entire boundary, were not in Afghanistan's interests, particularly as it cut away a proportion of Pashtuns at a time when the Pashtun ascendancy was under threat.²⁵ A number of internal revolts from the 1880s onwards had been suppressed with some difficulty, not least in the north, northwest and central Shia-dominated Hazarajat.²⁶

For the British, the construction of the Durand Line was designed to bring to an end the troubles of jurisdiction of the Pashtuns, but the multitude of passes and routes across the mountains and the ethnic homogeneity of the Pashtuns astride the 'border' meant that it was a line with no significance to the indigenous peoples. Far from seeing a boundary, Pashtuns ignored the Durand Line altogether. Consequently when fighting broke out in the 1890s, Pashtuns from the 'Afghan' side took part in the resistance and offered safe havens for those driven off by British troops. Moreover, the consolidation of the British side of the Durand Line provoked a degree of resistance even before the main revolt in 1897. British encroachments had stirred active resistance. The construction of fortifications along the Samana ridge created such unrest that General Sir William Lockhart had to form a column to fight its way through Orakzai country in January and February 1891.²⁷ He was forced to return and drive off an Orakzai *lashkar* that had attacked the Samana ridge posts that spring. British operations to secure the northern provinces of Hunza-Nagar and Chilas in the summer of 1892 (and thus secure routes to the Wakhan Corridor) led to fighting there too. In Waziristan, the construction of a road towards the Afghan border, prior to the formal demarcation, provoked a significant attack by *lashkars* at Wana in November 1894. A punitive column advanced through Mahsud country

22. R.A. Johnson, '“Russians at the Gates of India”?: Planning the Defence of India, 1885-1900', *The Journal of Military History* 67 (July 2003): 679-744.

23. Christian Tripodi, 'Peacemaking through bribes or cultural empathy? The political officer and Britain's strategy towards the North-West Frontier, 1901-1945' *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 31, 1 (2008): 123-151; Robert A Huttenback, 'The "Great Game" in the Pamirs and the Hindu Kush: The British Conquest of Hunza and Nagar' *Modern Asian Studies* 9, 1 (1975): 1-29.

24. Lord Roberts to Lord Kitchener, 28 January 1907, WO 30/57/28, Kitchener Papers, National Archives. Roberts planned for the creation of volunteer line of communication troops and 24,000 were raised by 1893. General Roberts, Principles of Army Administration in India, 1 April 1893, L/Mil/7/7056. India Office Records (IOR).

25. D. Edwards, *Heroes of the Age: Moral Fault Lines on the Afghan Frontier* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), p.83.

26. The Amir defeated the pretender to the throne, Ayub Khan, in 1881; the Ghilzai revolt (1886) L/PS/7/44 and L/PS/7/47, IOR; the Badakshan revolt (1888) L/PS/7/55, IOR; and the Hazara revolt (1891-3) L/PS/7/55 and Confidential Letters, Durand Papers, D 727/11.

27. General Sir William Lockhart (1841-1900) joined the Bengal Native Infantry in 1858 and served in Bhutan, Abyssinia, Afghanistan, Burma and on the North West Frontier. From 1890 he commanded the Punjab Frontier Force (the 'Piffers') and was promoted to General in 1896. He subsequently became Commander in Chief in India in 1898.

to suppress them. At Chitral in 1895, a small British force and the Political agent were besieged after a local succession crisis and had to be relieved by two flying columns, both of which had to fight their way up the valleys through hostile Pashtuns and Chitralis.²⁸

The Pashtuns were accorded particular attributes by British observers but almost all references repeat admiration for their fighting skills, condemnation of their bellicosity and the acknowledgement of their obligations under *Pashtunwali*. Colonel C.E. Callwell described them as ‘Marauding cut-throats’, ‘exceptionally fine mountaineers’, ‘admirable marksmen’, and ‘ferocious adversaries’. He suggested: ‘Like most savages they can see far better in the dark than Europeans can’.²⁹ Colonel H.D. Hutchinson, who took part in the Tirah campaign against the Afridi Pashtuns noted: ‘...these men are extremely bold, and they are as cunning and clever as they are audacious. They show much patience in watching and waiting for their prey, and great dash and impudence in their attacks when they make them’.³⁰

Mountstuart Elphinstone, the British Envoy of the East India Company to Afghanistan captured the mixed feelings the British had of the Pashtuns from the beginning. He wrote: ‘The English traveller from India ... would admire their strong and active forms, their fair complexions and European features, their industry and enterprise, the hospitality, sobriety and contempt for pleasure which appear in all their habits; and, above all, the independence and energy of their character ... On the whole, his impression of his new acquaintance would be favourable ... he would reckon them virtuous, compared with the people to whom he had been accustomed.’³¹ Like many of the British that followed, Elphinstone was struck by their ability to offer hospitality to any stranger in their homes and yet rob and butcher those they found on the trails. He concluded: ‘Their vices are revenge, envy, avarice, rapacity and obstinacy; on the other hand, they are fond of liberty, faithful to their friends, kind to their dependents, hospitable, brave, hardy, frugal, laborious and prudent.’ He continued: ‘Ruthless, cowardly robbery, cold-blooded, treacherous murder, are to him the salt of life. Brought up from his earliest childhood amid scenes of appalling treachery and merciless revenge, nothing can ever change him. As he lived – a shameless cruel savage – so he dies’.³² By the 1890s, the theory of martial races had become more firmly institutionalised in the Indian Army. The Pashtuns were regarded as natural hill fighters who, with the right discipline and training, could channel that prowess into military service for Britain. However, much has been written about the loaded nature of the term ‘tribesman’, with all its connotations of savagery and ignorance, and, when subjected to the brutal attacks of Pashtuns, particularly where the dead and wounded were cut up, it was understandable perhaps that British observers made this pessimistic and pejorative assessment. In common with many analysts of non-European races in the late nineteenth century, Bellew, an administrator among the Yusufzai, wondered if they were governable at all: ‘The most notable traits in their character are unbounded superstition, pride, cupidity and a most vengeful spirit ... They despise all other races ... They glory in being robbers, admit they are avaricious, and cannot deny the reputation they have acquired for faithlessness.’³³

These generally negative assessments appear to have deprived the Pashtuns of being much more than ‘wild tribesmen’ and yet, the British also had respect for their spirit and skill. The frontier was described as both grim *and* romantic. Its landscapes seemed untamed and service there offered the opportunity for military men to be free to exercise one’s own judgement not least because they were so often involved in small unit actions where junior officers were responsible for key decisions. There was also admiration for the outdoor, ‘frontier’ lifestyle of the Pashtun fighters which seemed

28. Captain H. L. Nevill, *Campaigns on the North West Frontier* (London, 1912), pp.164-208.

29. C.E. Callwell, *Tirah, 1897* (London, 1911), pp.34-5.

30. H.D. Hutchinson, *The Campaign in Tirah, 1897-1898* (1898, reprintd., New Delhi: lancer, 2008), p.89.

31. Mountstuart Elphinstone, *An Account of the Kingdom of Cabaul* (Karachi, 1839), p.198.

32. Cited in Hutchinson, *Tirah*, p.106.

33. H.W. Bellew, *The Races of Afghanistan being a brief Account of the Principal Nations Inhabiting that Country* (Calcutta: Thacker and Spink, 1880), p.55. See also *Report on the Yusufzais* by Henry Bellew, (Lahore: Punjab Government, 1864). IOR L/Mil/17/13/128.

to contrast with the unhealthy aspects of urban living in Britain. Robert MacDonald suggests that the British appreciated the sheer masculinity of the Pashtuns who lived a strong, independent and self-sufficient life, and, alongside Britain's experience of fighting the South Africans in 1899-1902, this drove the movement for national efficiency, scouting, and greater physical fitness in the early twentieth century.³⁴ Alan Moorhouse believes the North West Frontier also provided an opportunity to enhance individual reputations in the context of an imperial mission: amongst participants skirmishes were referred to as 'scraps' and sporting metaphors abound. Casualties were born 'cheerfully' and there was often genuine praise for the *sangfroid* of the troops.³⁵

The British Interpretation of the Pathan Revolt and Operations in Tirah

For the British, the causes of the revolt appeared at first to be little more than treachery and fanaticism.³⁶ There was universal acceptance that prominent and fiery mullahs had incited the tribesmen to attack the British, breaking previous agreements with impunity. The rising was initiated by an ambush on a small detachment at Maizar on 10 June 1897. The British artillery soon ran out of ammunition in the engagement and was forced to use blank rounds in the hope that this would deter a pursuit. Ironically, this fulfilled a prediction by the more enthusiastic mullahs: they had assured the tribesmen that the British shells would turn to stone and their bullets would turn to water the moment they hit the breast of a true believer. They demanded a Jihad to save the religion and condemned those they appeared to be profiting by association with infidels. The rising appeared to have been pre-meditated and the fact that the Bengal Lancers had been playing polo with tribesmen until the very afternoon of a major attack at Malakand in Swat seemed to be evidence of a conspiracy. There had, in fact, been rumours of trouble for some time before the outbreak, but anxious messages were so common on the frontier that few paid much attention. The small Tochi Field Force which had set out to punish the initial ambush party met little opposition which confirmed the idea that no further precautions were necessary. However, at 2145 hrs on 26 July 1897, a large force of Pashtuns was seen approaching the Malakand Fort at the head of the Swat Valley. It took four days to drive off a succession of attacks by several thousand fighters. As the British restored control in Malakand and Swat, more Pashtun groups joined the rising. On 26 August, the forts of the Khyber Pass were attacked and captured, despite the resistance of some Afridi levies.³⁷ Ammunition and rifles were seized in large quantities, adding to the considerable arsenal of modern weapons they already possessed.³⁸ There was an attack on the Samana forts by the Orakzais soon after, and raids towards the Settled Districts by smaller parties.³⁹ At Sarigari, a detachment of 36th Sikhs defended their isolated post to the last man, earning a great deal of admiration from British commentators. Against each rising, the British deployed fighting columns, and when they had won their pitched battles, they tried to tempt any guerrilla fighters into open warfare by destroying houses and crops. These methods also served to punish the tribes collectively and had the effect of forcing the Pashtuns into a negotiated peace. However, the Tirah campaign proved to be one of the most difficult and its results were mixed.⁴⁰

After the campaign, the British were keen to apply the lessons learned and to take steps to ensure more effective frontier security. Lord Curzon, who became Viceroy soon after the unrest, felt that the 'forward policy' of garrisons required modification because it acted as a catalyst for violence

34. R.H. Macdonald, *Sons of the Empire: The Frontier and the Boy Scout Movement, 1890-1918* (Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press, 1993), p.5.

35. Hutchinson, *Tirah*, p.100.

36. Major Deane, Political Agent in Malakand to Foreign Secretary of the Government of India, 9 May 1897 cited in Ahmed, *Millennium and Charisma*, p.105.

37. Colonel H.C. Wylly, *From the Black Mountain to Waziristan* (London: Macmillan, 1912), p.314. Of the 2,000 Afridis employed within the Indian Army, some had deserted, prompting the authorities to deploy the remainder away from the theatre of operations. Nevertheless, the majority remained in service and some fought at Malakand despite the entreaties of the Pashtun fighters that they should desert.

38. It was rumoured that 80,000 rifles had been sold by the Amir of Afghanistan to the tribesmen.

39. Wylly, *From the Black Mountain to Waziristan*, p.384.

40. *Tirah Operations, 1897-98*, report by Captain Flamsted Walters, 1900. IOR L/Mil/17/13/99.

and defiance of the imperial authorities, and it simply cost too much. British garrisons were replaced by local militias and the deployment of more Political Officers.

Yet, almost all studies of this campaign have focussed on the British perspective.⁴¹ To get a more comprehensive picture of the conflict, there is an imperative to recover the ‘voice’ of the Pashtuns. As already intimated, sources are scarce and fragmentary, but their narrative can to some extent be reconstructed through the records of their actions. The British accounts recorded the Pashtuns’ attacks, their strengths and their movements. They also recorded the comments made by tribesmen at the conclusion of the campaign. Through an analysis of these records, it is possible to reconstruct, tentatively, something of their tactics and, perhaps, of their intentions. A detailed study of the Tirah campaign, fought by the Afridis and Orakzais, was just one part of the Pathan Revolt but illustrates the wider issues of the conflict and thus offers an opportunity to analyse the nature of the frontier in this crucial period in far greater depth.

The Pashtun Perspective: Relative Strength and Fighting Techniques

The Afridis and Orakzais knew from previous encounters with the British that it was impossible to survive an engagement from fixed positions or dense formations against their firepower. Instead they adopted dispersed ‘light infantry’ tactics, concentrating into larger groups for specific tasks such as an assault on a fortified post. The basic grouping was the *lashkar*, formed of an irregular number (which might range from 30 to 1,000) and based loosely on a particular leader, clan or a group of villages. The tribesmen moved great distances carrying the absolute minimum of rations, often at night, so as to appear without warning close to the British columns, or to avoid their pursuits. The British found it difficult to bring the tribesmen into a decisive battle, and as columns advanced through the mountains, the tribesmen would give way in the front so as to bring harassing fire down on the flanks or to snipe at picquets that ‘crowded the heights’. Winston Churchill, whilst serving as a lieutenant during the Pathan Revolt, noted: ‘Great and expensive forces, equipped with all the developments of scientific war, are harried and worried without rest or mercy by an impalpable cloud of active and well armed skirmishers. To enter the mountains and attack an Afridi is to jump into the water to catch a fish.’⁴²

The tribesmen also knew that the British forces would be at a disadvantage when trying to withdraw down mountain slopes or from valleys which they had briefly occupied. Having offered merely token resistance to an advancing column, the moment a withdrawal got underway the *lashkars* would intensify their fire and pressure the troops with a close pursuit. Moreover, the Pashtuns liked to be certain of their kills and they would engage in hand to hand fighting quite readily. Traditional long knives were favoured in night attacks, and isolated detachments in *sangars* (temporary stone fortifications) were particularly vulnerable. Defiles, forested and other ‘close country’ made possible the use of surprise rushes of knife-wielding fighters, and had the added advantage of preventing the British using their fire support or efficient command and control structures. Such was the threat that subsequent British analyses of the campaign in Tirah recommended pushing picquets further out to reduce the casualties from night-time sniping or the sudden charge of swordsmen.⁴³

However, of greater concern was the ability of the Pashtun marksmen to pick off the British officers. This fact alone suggests the Pashtun fighters knew that British assaults and the co-ordination of their fire were to a large extent dependent on the officers. Killing them was likely to seriously

41. See for example, James Spain, *The Pathan Borderland* (The Hague, 1963), ch.5; Arthur Swinson, *North West Frontier* (London: Hutchinson, 1967), pp.283-86; Byron Farwell, *Queen Victoria's Little Wars* (London: Allen Lane, 1973), pp.318-29.

42. W.S. Churchill, ‘The Ethics of Frontier Policy’, *United Services Magazine*, 17 (1898), p.506, cited in T.R. Moreman, ‘The British and Indian Armies and North West Frontier Warfare, 1849-1914’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 20, 1, (1992), p.40.

43. A.K. Slessor, ‘Field Fortifications in Tirah’, *United Services Magazine*, 19, (1899), pp.400-9.

disrupt their ability to bring down effective fire and to manoeuvre. One officer noted that ‘Hundreds of these [Pashtuns]... have been in our service, and they not only easily recognise our officers by their conspicuous head-dress and gallant leading, but they well know their value, and undoubtedly they select them for their attentions and pick them off’.⁴⁴

By the 1890s, a proportion of fighters had served in the Indian Army but, with their service at an end, they had returned to the hills where they set about training fellow tribesmen in the techniques of fire control and small unit tactics.⁴⁵ In addition, as Tim Moreman has indicated, a larger number of modern breech-loading firearms had reached the tribesmen either through theft of Indian Army weapons, from Afghan sources or through gun-runners based in the Persian Gulf.⁴⁶ Indeed, this campaign was the first in which British and Indian troops had faced tribesmen armed in significant numbers with ‘weapons of precision’. Yet, even when armed with inferior weapons, the tribesmen were also crack shots. The British estimated that about half the fighters were armed with breech-loaders. The fact that the Afridis secured 50,000 rounds of ammunition from the Khyber forts also enhanced their capability.

The British felt they had learned valuable lessons from the campaign of 1897-8, but there was some anxiety about the deficiencies exposed in their training and tactical doctrine. What is fascinating from the point of view of this study is the willingness to admit that the Pashtuns had often had the upper hand. Major A.C. Yate noted that in the Tirah: ‘Our best frontier officers and soldiers found themselves foiled and at times worsted by these unorganised guerrillas’.⁴⁷ It was evident to British units that frontal attacks, volley-firing and quarter column advances without the utilisation of cover simply invited unnecessary casualties. One officer wrote that the elaborate preparations for volley firing were easily evaded by the Pashtuns who ‘never remained in position long enough for us to go through all the elaborate preliminaries’.⁴⁸ A new emphasis on marksmanship and musketry training was also the direct result of the experience of coming under the effective fire of the Pashtuns. The British aimed to bring down a sufficient weight of accurate fire to enable infantry to advance in extended order up mountain sides but still be in a sufficiently coherent body to be able to resist the weight of a sudden charge at close quarters.⁴⁹ Again, these precautions indicate something of the Pashtun Afridi tactics. Rather than abandoning every position, the tribesmen may well have calculated that a British or Indian force which was either too spread out or weakened by casualties could be overwhelmed by a counter-attack from dead-ground as they neared the crest of a hill feature. General Sir William Lockhart, the commander of the Tirah Field Force, was praiseworthy of the scouts of the 3rd and 5th Gurkhas because they were able to climb steep slopes, carry out ambushes at night and ‘surpass the tribesmen in their own tactics’.⁵⁰ The British tended to avoid night operations in part because of the difficulties in co-ordination, particularly of their fire and large units, but also because it simply invited a surprise attack. The only exception to this was handfuls of picked Gurkhas who operated outside camp perimeters at night to ‘hunt’ snipers. The Pashtuns learned to keep their distance from these Gurkhas or to operate in larger groups.

44. Hutchinson, *Tirah*, p.129.

45. Moreman, ‘The British and Indian Armies and North West Frontier Warfare’, p.47.

46. T.R. Moreman, ‘The Arms Trade and the North West Frontier Pathan Tribes, 1890-1914’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 22, 2, (1994), pp.193, 198, and 205.

47. A.C. Yate, ‘North West Frontier Warfare’, *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute of India*, 42, 248, (October 1898), p.1191.

48. G.F.R. Henderson, *The Science of War: A Collection of Essays and Lectures, 1891-1903* (London: Longman’s Green and Co., 1905), pp.345-6.

49. E. Peach, ‘The Tactical Principles and Details Best Suited to Warfare on the Frontiers of India’, *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute of India*, 28, 137, (October 1899), p.344.

50. Cited in Moreman, p.55.

Pashtun Operations and Strategy

The strategy of the Afridis was to clear the British from their lands astride the Khyber Pass and maintain the inviolability of the Tirah Maidan valleys, whilst the Orakzais, further south, aimed to drive the British from the Samana Ridge by destroying the forts there. The initial attack by the Afridis against the forts of the Khyber Pass was far more successful than anticipated and encouraged the Orakzais to commence their own attacks at Samana. A few isolated militia posts were easily engulfed and destroyed. A force of 3,000 tribesmen then sought to eject the Kurram militia from Sadda, but when a larger British force assembled, the tribesmen fell back. The focus once again shifted to the Samana Ridge. As they advanced eastwards along the Khanki Valley a small British force withdrew, and this bought time for a considerable force of 10,000 tribesmen to concentrate below the forts. Undermining the walls whilst protected by small arms fire, the Sarigari fortification was overwhelmed. However, the Orakzais, with an Afridi *lashkar* in support, failed to capture or destroy the two most important positions on the ridge, and, when British reinforcements arrived with their artillery, the tribesmen retreated. In these attacks, the tribesmen had focussed on the symbols of British occupation. They had set out to uproot the British, but also to delay reinforcements and to concentrate wherever the threat appeared greatest. Despite their fragmented structures, the presence of an Afridi *lashkar* alongside the Orakzais was a significant commitment to tribal unity.

Through letters between prominent personalities, intercepted by the British in October, it is clear that the two tribes hoped to be able to count on the support of the Afghans. A delegation was sent to Kabul and, in accordance with protocol, it was treated with great courtesy by the Amir. There is little doubt that Abdur Rahman Khan was concerned about the British insistence on the demarcation of the Durand Line.⁵¹ The border meant that he lost the buffer zone of Pashtuns some of whom, at least, owed a loose suzerainty to him. In the territories of the Mohmands and Bajauris this was acutely felt. The Amir reasoned that the British, who had twice invaded Afghanistan, might be more prepared to do so again if they had roads and frontier bases close by the border. Internal unrest within Afghanistan might just provide the British with a perfect pretext for intervention. He once expressed his desire to have a ‘wall’ around his country, suggesting he was keen to keep out the Europeans.⁵² Yet the existence of ill-defined borders was actually the most pragmatic solution because it made possible raids by the Afghan forces against peripheral communities on which the impoverished government sometimes depended. There was also the question of prestige. When challenged as to why he wanted to retain part of Waziristan during the border negotiations, he stated it was a question of *nang*: ‘In cutting away from me these frontier tribes who are people of my nationality and religion, you will injure my prestige in the eyes of my subjects and will make me weak, and my weakness is injurious to your government’.⁵³ When the Amir was pressed by the British government to resist all entreaties by the Russians, he replied that it was little use being reminded of what his enemies might take when his ‘friends’ had already taken some much more.

To strengthen his domestic position, Abdur Rahman claimed to be *Zia-ul-Millat wa-ud-Din* (Light of Union and Faith) and the King of Islam, that is, of all the Muslims in his realm.⁵⁴ Although the British interpreted this as a sign that he was secretly fomenting unrest on the frontier, it was in fact a means to delegitimize any potential rebel. He was in effect saying a rebellion against him would constitute a rebellion against the faith itself. In the same vein, Abdur Rahman produced a book, the *Taqwin-ud-Din*, which dealt with the central role of Jihad in Islam. At a series of meetings attended by frontier fakirs and imams alongside Afghan *ulema* there were a number of anti-British tirades. These did not go unnoticed in India, but, as Sir

51. R.I. Bruce, *The Forward Policy and Its Results* (London: Longmans Green, 1900), p.249.

52. Edwards, *Heroes of the Age*, p.83; S.M. Khan, *The Life of Abdur Rahman Khan* (London, 1906), pp.175-7.

53. Cited in Charles Miller, *Khyber: British India's North West Frontier* (London: Macdonald and Jane's, 1977), p.240.

54. Abdur Rahman was confronted by loyal and more belligerent factions in Kabul and had to calibrate his responses carefully, taking care to avoid provocation of the British. Bruce, *The Forward Policy*, p.252ff.

Mortimer Durand noted, the Amir was known to invent a ‘foreign threat’ periodically to bolster his popularity. In 1887 Abdur Rahman had issued a *firman* exhorting Afghans to prepare to resist an invasion by infidels. Since the British harboured no such plans, Durand concluded it was a device to distract the people from a revolt by Gilzais.⁵⁵

Soon after the tribesmen had declared their war on the British, Abdur Rahman gave a deliberately ambiguous response: he had to be sure that he did not lose face in the eyes of his own people and he dare not publically disown the call for support from Muslims in distress. Initially he told the tribal representatives, ‘You should wait a few days, so that I may hold a consultation ... and decide what steps should be taken. I will then either come myself or send you my son for Jihad with our victorious troops’, but later he admonished the tribesmen and ordered them to settle their differences with the British, claiming he had made agreements he could not break.⁵⁶ His chief criticism was that the tribes had not informed him of their intentions before the outbreak of violence.⁵⁷ He also tried to prevent, where he could, Afghans joining the revolt; but, with such a porous ‘border’, this was really impossible.⁵⁸

For the frontier tribes, however, great significance was placed on this apparent Afghan backing. A meeting of a *jirga* took place at the Musjid at Bagh, just three miles west of the Tirah Maiden, a spot which, according to one British officer, ‘has always been known as a centre of intrigue and fanaticism’.⁵⁹ It appears that in June 1897, 130 mullahs from Tirah had attended a *jirga* convened by Hadda Mullah in Afghanistan where he had preached a vehemently anti-British sermon.⁶⁰ Once the revolt had begun in Swat and Mohmand territory, Hadda Mullah’s *murids* (acolytes) moved through the mountains urging the Pashtuns to join the Jihad. The *murids* offered to end all clan feuds in order to facilitate this greater calling.⁶¹ Amongst the items the British later recovered were letters between the Pashtun leaders, including those as far afield as Malakand. The correspondence revealed that the Pashtuns had lobbied the Amir of Afghanistan for support because the British were: ‘day by day violating the former agreements, ... forcibly encroaching upon our limits, [and] realising fines ... from us for the arms stolen in the Khyber by their own servants [namely militia personnel in the Indian Army]’.⁶² The letters stated that the Amir had promised to try and ‘make peace between us and the British government’. The letters also indicated that Sayyid Akbar of the Aka Khels was a leading advocate of resistance and invoked the obligation of Jihad to mobilise his peers. Subsequent interviews with tribesmen revealed that they were also concerned about an increase in the salt tax and the refuge accorded to Pashtun women who fled the tribal areas by the British authorities in the Settled Districts. The Adam Khels and Jowakis were the most enthusiastic but some Orakzais joined in more reluctantly. The 8,000 Zaimusht chose to remain outside of the 1897 revolt altogether.⁶³ The fragmented nature of Pashtun society was a weakness the British would try and exploit, but it also created the more immediate problem of reducing the number of fighters available for the revolt. Out of the potential 50,000 men, there may have been fewer than 35,000 available. To make matters worse, after the initial attacks in

55. Confidential Letters, Durand Papers, D 727/8, IOR; P. Sykes, *Sir Mortimer Durand* (London: Cassell and Co., 1926), pp.199-200.

56. ‘The Risings of the North West Frontier, 1897-98’, *Pioneer Press*, Allahabad, p.150.

57. Amir Abdur Rahman, 23 September 1897, cited in Hutchinson, *Tirah*, p.15.

58. Comissioner Peshawar District to Punjab and Simla, 8 and 10 September, and 2 October 1897, telegrams, 78, Frontier Branch, Foreign Department, Government of the Punjab. Directorate of Archives, North West Frontier province, Shahi Bagh, Peshawar.

59. Hutchinson, *Tirah*, pp.84-5.

60. Khyber Political Diaries, 28 June 1897; 7 August 1897, IOR L/PS/7.

61. Deputy Commissioner Khyber to Punjab and Simla, 14 and 16 August 1897, telegrams, 76, Frontier Branch, Foreign Department, Government of the Punjab. Directorate of Archives, North West Frontier Province, Shahi Bagh, Peshawar.

62. Adam Khan (Khambar Khel) to his brother Muhammad Zaman Khan, Kabul, 18th Jamadi-ul-Awal 1315 AH (15 October 1897), and Sherdil Khan and Abdul Rahim, son of Malik Sinjab Khan Orakzai to Malik Sinjab Khan, 28th Jamadi-ul-Awal 1315 AH (25 October 1897) in Hutchinson, *Tirah*, pp.123 and 125.

63. Theodore Pennell, cited in Victoria Schofield, *Every Rock, Every Hill* (London: Buchan and Enright, 1984), p.139.

August and early September, many of the tribesmen unilaterally demobilised to bring in their crops.⁶⁴ Indeed there seems to have been a rapid waning in enthusiasm for any *jihad*.⁶⁵ However, raiding was constant throughout September, particularly in the direction of Kohat.⁶⁶

The failure to obtain Afghan support did not preclude Pashtuns taking refuge across the ‘border’, and offered a degree of ‘strategic depth’ in a guerrilla campaign. The strategic problem was that, although the tribesmen could operate on ‘interior lines’ in Tirah, they could not be sure which way a British force might come. A large number of Afridi tribesmen had to be retained in and around the Khyber Pass which seemed the most obvious target for any British counter-offensive. It was also possible the British might advance due west from Kohat along the Khanki Valley or up the Mastura River from Peshawar. The final route was in fact the one that the British opted for, from the south across the Samana Range, and then across the grain of the mountains towards the Tirah Maidan. There was nevertheless great faith amongst the tribesmen in the natural defences of the landscape. The Sampagha Pass above the Khanki Valley was a formidable obstacle in itself but much of the region consisted of narrow defiles and mountainous terrain, where hard cover and concealment for dispersed defenders made it ideal for ambushes or fighting from prepared and entrenched positions.

In fact, the tribesmen appear to have believed, with fighting going on elsewhere across the frontier, they may have in fact already won their campaign and no further precautions were necessary. They had achieved their objectives of taking the Khyber and had prevented any offensive action by the British in the south. For eight weeks there was little sign of any British counter-attack and the harvest had been gathered in without any hindrance. The British delay had in fact been caused by the difficulty in acquiring sufficient transport and troops for the campaign (some 20,000 ponies and mules, and 13,000 camels were required). When Indian pioneers appeared near Shinwari fort (south of the Samana Ridge), the tribesmen convened another *jirga* at Bagh. It seems that several leading spokesmen urged resistance, claiming that any attempt to conclude a separate peace would constitute a betrayal of Islam. Oaths were apparently sworn over the Quran. Nevertheless, an Orakzai delegation from the Kanki Valley tried to offer their submission to General Yeatman Biggs soon after. His refusal to accept their offer because of the raiding going on at the time compelled them to join the revolt.⁶⁷ British track-building parties were therefore soon under long range fire, and there was evidence that sangars were being built along the Sempagha pass from October 1897. Observation parties were despatched to all the valleys by which the British might come. The objective was clear – to keep the British at bay.

The British road-building activity south of the Samana Ridge had indicated to the Pashtuns the axis and the likely date of an offensive so that despite ‘great secrecy in issuing orders’, a number of tribesmen had gathered at Dargai to contest the advance. According to one British officer, the natural defile at Dargai not only made a defensive stance far easier, it also afforded ‘excellent cover, naturally provided by the rocks and improved by walls, etc, built up by [the tribesmen]’. Light artillery could make no impression on the sangars, and there was a steep climb to the tribesmen’s positions. It took the leading British and Indian troops six hours to reach the point where an assault could be made. The Pashtun riflemen put down some fire but gave way as soon as the British began to close on them, and they were prompted to retreat as soon as they came under fire from a flanking force under General Kempster. On the approach march and in the frontal assault across an exposed area barely 200 yards wide, the British had lost nineteen killed and wounded. Pashtun losses were unknown.

64. Callwell, *Tirah*, p.7; Commissioner Peshawar District to Punjab and Simla, 5 September, 2 and 4 October 1897, telegrams, 78, Frontier Branch, Foreign Department, Government of the Punjab. Directorate of Archives, North West Frontier Province, Shahi Bagh, Peshawar.

65. Assistant Commissioner Thal to Deputy Commissioner Kohat, 8 February 1898, telegrams, 78, Frontier Branch, Foreign Department, Government of the Punjab. Directorate of Archives, North West Frontier Province, Shahi Bagh, Peshawar.

66. Callwell, *Tirah*, p.31.

67. Callwell, *Tirah*, p.33.

The British decided that they could not retain this high mountain top position because of a lack of water and manpower, and consequently the troops began to withdraw soon after 1400. There was a great deal of controversy about this decision, not least because it became necessary to retake the Dargai heights just a few days later at a much greater cost in lives. However, in this debate, there was little thought given to the Pashtun perspective. The sound of the artillery fire at Dargai from 0920 drew Orakzais and Afridis from the Khanki Valley, and they began to concentrate on the northern slopes, with a strength estimated at 12,000. Colonel Charles Callwell noted: ‘As the afternoon proceeded, the enemy began to gather in great strength to the north of Dargai. Swarms of tribesmen were observed streaming up out of the Khanki Valey to participate in the fray’.⁶⁸ The original defenders also returned to their positions and began a cautious pursuit for 2 miles. Using firepower rather than trying to come to grips with the British, they focussed on shooting down the men exposed on the hillsides below them, inflicting a further 18 casualties. By nightfall, the Pashtuns had regained all their defences, and, from their point of view, had successfully driven off the British column. It must have been evident to them that, if the British attempted a second attack on Dargai, it made sense to try and concentrate as much fire as possible on the narrow frontage they would have to take. They must also have reasoned, and their deployments subsequently suggest that they did, that they had to avoid being outflanked. Tribesmen were pushed westwards along the ridge and also covered the spurs leading from the British forts on the Samana. Lockhart originally considered by-passing Dargai, but these new dispositions indicated that an attempt to pass beneath Dargai to the west (below either the Chagru Kotal or Saran Suk) would simply invite a fusillade against his flank and possibly expose his column to a large attack.⁶⁹ General Kempster was thus compelled to make a second assault on the Dargai Heights.

The British account of the battle that followed has been well-documented in a number of contemporary and subsequent works. There is little doubt that the British and Indian troops who took part were courageous, disciplined and determined, sustaining very heavy losses whilst continuing to press on into the Pashtun position, but there are almost no analyses of the tribesmen’s actions. First, and most importantly, the new Pashtun deployments had compelled Lockhart to change his plan to by-pass Dargai. Second, the tribesmen knew that the British were coming and what route they would take. The ground had been carefully selected and channelled them into a specific killing area. Almost all the British casualties occurred in a one small area that could be swept by small arms’ fire. The tribesmen opened a long range fire at about 0930, but it was not until 1100 that the first wave of Gurkhas was in a position to assault the heights. As they tried to cross in small groups ‘each clump of men that dashed forward melted away under the converging and accurate fire, and after a time affairs practically came to standstill’.⁷⁰ The British attack was completely held up, the baggage was at a standstill and there were concerns that ‘a check at this early stage might have disastrous results’.⁷¹ The Gurkhas were pinned down for three hours and 2 other British regiments fared little better. A fresh wave of two regiments nevertheless carried the whole mass forward. Interestingly, when the British made the final ascent, they found the tribesmen had already abandoned the sangars along the crest. Large numbers of them were seen retreating down into the Khanki Valley. Several explanations were offered for this, including the effect of artillery and the psychological effect of the sudden rush of the Gordons and Sikhs. However, it seems clear that, whilst these contributed to the Pashtun decision to fall back, their lack of ammunition also had a part to play. The tribesmen had commenced firing at 0930 and had held the Gurkhas, Dorsets and Derbyshires under sustained fire between 1130 and 1500. The Gordons and Sikhs final assault went in just after 1500. It is quite conceivable that the weight of fire was beginning to slacken at this point. The British had suffered 200 casualties, and, whilst the tribesmen were forced to abandon the Dargai position at the end, they could claim satisfaction at their achievements if not outright victory. The British force had been held up, they had managed to escape with their own forces largely intact and they had carried away most of their own dead and wounded.

68. Callwell, *Tirah*, p.45.

69. Hutchinson, *Tirah*, pp.52-3. Callwell, *Tirah*, p.46.

70. Callwell, *Tirah*, p.50.

71. Callwell, *Tirah*, p.51.

The British established their first camp in the Khanki Valley at Khangarbur on a plateau, having cleared a village of Afridi marksmen with artillery fire. After two days of accumulating supplies (caused by the absence of sufficient transport animals and the difficult terrain), the British were aware that they were in danger of losing momentum. Colonel Hutchinson regretted that in the eyes of the tribesmen the delay would be put down to: ‘hesitation and fear, and, in proportion to the timidity which we (in their estimation) display, do[es] their own courage and confidence increase, and their numbers too’.⁷² The Afridi tribesmen used the opportunity to improve the defences of the Sampagha Pass with ‘sangars to command all likely approaches, [and] digging trenches and rifle pits’.⁷³ Former sappers of the Indian Army who had rejoined their tribesmen at the end of their service were said to be prominent in directing the engineering.⁷⁴

It was estimated that up to 12,000 tribesmen had concentrated from the various valleys to confront the single British column. On 23rd October, foraging parties were attacked by large numbers of tribesmen and a series of small attacks were mounted against the British camp. All the hill top picquets came under fire between dusk and midnight. Pashtun casualties were found within 30 yards of the camp’s perimeter. There was not a concerted attempt to overrun the camp, as had been attempted at Wana three years before by the Waziris, and it is likely that the Pashtuns were more interested in raiding to acquire rifles, trophies and loot from the extensive lines of baggage. There was a relatively quiet day and then a more concerted attempt to destroy foraging parties that were detached from the main body. Each of these parties had to be protected by strong escorts of infantry and some mountain guns. Even so, as they withdrew, they came under the fire of tribesmen who pursued them closely. Ambushes were frequent. One favoured tactic was to wait until the British crested a ridge where they were thus silhouetted against the skyline. A single volley from the tribesmen at 1,000 yards had the effect of ‘invariably knocking someone over’.⁷⁵ One of the greatest hazards for British forces though was sniping into the camp after dark. Casualties could amount to 20 every night, and the steady attrition caused significant problems, not least in the morale of the camp followers. Security was also a problem. The presence of so many camp followers, and the fact that a number were Pashtuns from the Peshawar and Kohat areas, must have created opportunities for the tribesmen, just as it did for the British who wished to gather more intelligence on the defences at Sampagha. A party of five Afridis who tendered their surrender on 24 October, for example, were treated with great suspicion despite the fact that all had previously served in the Indian Army. It seemed unlikely that the tribesmen would have let them reach the camp unmolested, and they may have been planning to rejoin their fellow tribesmen soon after.

The British advanced towards the Sampagha Pass hoping that the Pashtuns would attempt a stand like that of the Orakzais at Dargai, simply because they wanted to bring them to battle and inflict a decisive defeat rather than having to endure the steady sniping and guerrilla attacks. At Gundaki, the British surprised the tribesmen by a sudden movement at dawn, and the snipers who were still sleeping after a night of shooting were almost captured. In fact, the tribesmen had a routine for their sniping: they would observe the British camp and its picquets or sentry posts closely before dusk so as to have a clear idea of the targets to engage that night. Shooting went on between dusk and midnight, and the tribesmen generally retired after that time, but resumed their fire after daybreak. As the British advanced towards the Sampagha, there was almost no opposition because the ground did not lend itself to defence. Wide valley floors and low hills did not afford much protection. At Sampagha itself, it was soon clear that the tribesmen did not wish to fight there either. As early as 0700, the tribesmen began to abandon their forward positions and few had much appetite to endure the concentrated shellfire of 36 mountain guns and four hours of bombardment. Although it was estimated that twelve standards had been seen, it likely that a token force held the pass itself. About twenty tribesmen held a *sangar* in the centre of the position, but after being shelled for 20

72. Hutchinson, *Tirah*, p.61.

73. Hutchinson, *Tirah*, p.62.

74. Ex-army personnel also directed the fire of the tribesmen and provided effective leadership and discipline. Moreman, *The Army in India*, p.62.

75. Hutchinson, *Tirah*, .63.

minutes they ran back over the pass, and it seems that a good many fighters were in fact herding their flocks, shepherding their families into the hills or burying their grain to the north.

It was a similar story at the Arhanga Pass, with British artillery driving off a token defence force that was estimated at no more than 1,000.⁷⁶ Whilst Lockhart had achieved his objective of penetrating into the heart of the Tirah Maidan, which had long been considered inviolate by the Afridis, there must have been some unease that they had been deprived of their decisive battle. The villages and homesteads they marched past were deserted, although the haste of their departure was evident in the sheer volume of grain, walnuts and potatoes that had been left behind. The Pashtuns had dispersed into the hills and side valleys.

The tribesmen were not inactive though. On two successive nights the Zakka Khel Afridis raided the baggage columns that had been overtaken by darkness before they reached the British camp. Several soldiers and drivers were killed and 11000 rounds of rifle ammunition were seized as well as other military equipment. The raids had a disproportionate and negative effect on the morale of the baggage personnel. The British for their part were seen as raiders too. The foraging parties that went out every day into the villages of the Tirah Maidan recovered great quantities of food such that each man of the invasion force could be provided with two full days rations from just one small area. A few other souvenirs were taken too; jezails, swords, daggers and hand written Qurans were much prized. Bagh was also the object of British interest. The Musjid was left untouched but searches revealed letters between Pashtun tribal leaders and the Afghan Amir. General Lockhart selected the targets for his operations carefully. Where there was resistance, houses from which fighters had fired were burnt down and towers were dynamited or shelled. However, on the whole he refrained from wholesale destruction. Tribal elders were summoned to hear the terms that Lockhart would offer for their surrender, but there was little appreciable difference to the amount of fighting taking place every day. Sniping into the British camp occurred every night, and there were two incidents where British forces that were withdrawing got into difficulties and sustained significant casualties.

Over a period of ten days, whilst the British paused to await the outcome of the *jirgas* deliberations and bring in their fines, every forage party was fired upon. The telegraph wire which extended back over the passes, was cut every night and ‘a mile or two of it carried off’. The Pashtuns knew that these communications were important to the British for both logistical and operational decisions, and they also knew that parties who came to fix the line could be attacked. Foraging parties were frequently surprised and occasionally knife-wielding attackers attempted to get into hand to hand combat. Yet it was perhaps the now constant sniping that had the most demoralising effect. Nor were these random single shots. Pashtun marksmen would crawl into position below the picquets in groups of three or four using the natural folds in the ground and “‘brown” the camp with forty or fifty shots before they [could] be dislodged’.⁷⁷ Casualties began to mount steadily with one or two killed or wounded each day.⁷⁸

It was during this period that the British observed small groups of tribesmen carrying away the grain and stores from buildings within a few miles of the British camp. This may indicate that the tribesmen were short of supplies in the hills as they tended to carry very little with them when fighting. Certainly letters the British intercepted earlier in the year mentioned that they were ‘waiting for the summer to pass as ... common folk cannot afford to arrange for the necessities of Jihad. It is difficult for them to fight in summer’.⁷⁹ It made sense that they should recover the food they had buried as they needed it. To forestall the effort, the British mounted an operation on 9 November 1897 to the Saran Sar, a feature that stood amidst the Zaka

76. Hutchinson, *Tirah*, p.77.

77. Hutchinson, *Tirah*, p.88.

78. Nevill, *Campaigns on the North West Frontier*, p.317. There was praise for Afridi tactics in H. Woosnam Mills, *The Tirah Campaign* (Lahore, 1898), pp.119-20 and Field Marshal Lord Birdwood, *Khaki and Gown: An Autobiography* (London, 1942), p.86.

79. Hutchinson, *Tirah*, p.121.

Khel country where they intended to destroy houses and towers and thus induce surrender. The advance was barely opposed, but, as the troops turned to withdraw at 1400, the Pashtuns ‘appeared as if by magic’. They pressed hard on the heels of the British units causing ‘at once many casualties’. The need to retrieve the wounded and the dead, to avoid mutilation of the bodies, encumbered the soldiers and meant they had difficulty in maintaining effective fire during the withdrawal. A company of Northamptonshire tried to pull back through a defile with their casualties but were attacked from above and suffered severe losses.⁸⁰ The survivors formed a small defensive ring in some buildings and spent the night there. The Afridis, having taken advantage of the British in the defile, decided not to try and pursue the British any further in case the small garrison was reinforced from the camp nearby.

On 12 November, after a lull in fighting for three days, representatives of the Orakzais were brought to the camp. It is noticeable that those who arrived were all ‘graybeards’. Whilst these men accepted the fines and submission of rifles as compensation in principle, the speed at which these could be arranged would be slow. The elders were probably concerned that the British might be tempted to stay for good, or at least prolong their ‘pacification’ measures and destroy more crops and property, but their faces were inscrutable as they listened to the British terms. The lull in fighting nevertheless suggests there was some unanimity about seeing an early British withdrawal. Curiously, they asked the British Political Officers to assist them in apportioning the fines across each of the clans and sections because, they said, they would ‘quarrel’ if left to themselves. General Lockhart immediately put an end to the destruction of property of the Orakzais and even decree that the British would pay for any supplies they requisitioned. Nevertheless, fighting continued, particularly as almost all of the Afridis were still defiant. The Afridis may have been hoping that, as the British supply situation became more acute and the winter weather threatened their already attenuated lines of communication, they could hold out.⁸¹ The British therefore continued their punitive measures against the Afridis, destroying their houses, including that of Mullah Sayid Akbar, Aka Khel, whom they assumed was the ‘leader’ of the revolt. As usual, the Afridis carried out night time sniping, and, whilst giving way before any advance, pursued any party that was withdrawing.

When General Kempster attempted to withdraw his brigade from the Waran Valley on 16 November 1897, the Afridis attacked the rearguard in large numbers. Once again, wounded men delayed the withdrawal and the Afridis tried to work around the flanks of the British force as it neared a pass. Wooded and precipitous country provided a screen for this movement which brought them to within a few hundred yards of the 15th Sikhs. Having already inflicted a number of casualties with rifle fire throughout the afternoon, some of the tribesmen were eager to close with the Indian troops in hand-to-hand fighting. However, as they emerged from the woods, the Sikhs formed a skirmish line and opened fire at close range. The effect was devastating and later estimates claimed that 200 tribesmen were shot down in a few minutes.⁸² Yet this did not deter the Afridis at all. As the troops began to run low on ammunition and darkness gathered, they found that a group of tribesmen had again worked around their flank and positioned themselves in a cluster of small burnt-out buildings directly on their line of withdrawal. The British charged them and bayoneted or shot the tribesmen and then established a hasty defensive perimeter. One half company was isolated by a *nullah* some 400 yards away and it was clear that the Afridis meant to occupy it so as to enfilade the defenders of the main position. As they swept out of the cover of the *nullah*, they were surprised to find it occupied already and were forced to pull back. After that, the Afridis made no attempt to try to rush the defenders who were in most cases protected by low walls or embankments. Such an attack, even at night, would have been costly. Instead, they fired into the buildings until 2300, hurled threats at the Pashtun servant of one of the British officers, and then drew off.⁸³ However, they were satisfied that, for a second time, they had also

80. Enquiry into the circumstances attending the losses sustained by the Northamptonshire Regiment in Tirah, on 9th November 1897, 4 January 1898, IOR L/Mil/7/15882.

81. Hutchinson, *Tirah*, p.107.

82. Hutchinson, *Tirah*, p.132.

83. Hutchinson, *Tirah*, pp.112-13.

managed to ambush a British half company in a ravine. A party of Dorsets had mistakenly marched into the defile in the darkness and when attacked, they had formed small groups.⁸⁴ Here the fighting was at close quarters and eleven officers and soldiers were killed. The number of casualties amongst the tribesmen was unknown since they recovered all their dead and wounded before dawn.

After the incident, General Lockhart consoled his men by reminding them they were ‘opposed to perhaps the best skirmishers and the best natural shots in the world, and the country they inhabit is the most difficult on the face of the globe’.⁸⁵ Colonel Hutchinson wrote that in the daily skirmishes and rearguard actions, the tribesmen ‘have often got the best of it’.⁸⁶ He noted that the Zaka-Khels have ‘held their own against us with quite a fair measure of success’ and they continued to influence other tribal groups such as the Kuki-Khels. In terms of casualties, he estimated that ‘I fancy it will not be very much in our favour’. He continued: ‘And when we consider, in addition, the rifles and ammunition we have lost, the baggage that has been raided, and the transport animals that have been carried off, then it becomes obvious, and outside argument, that ... we are at a great disadvantage compared with our savage foe’.⁸⁷ Lieutenant Cowie of the Dorsets echoed the frustrations of many officers and men with having to remain stationary and wait for a submission of surrender by the tribes when it was clear that, by their actions, they did not consider themselves defeated at all.⁸⁸ Lockhart and other authors claimed that the British had demonstrated their ability to penetrate every part of the Tirah with impunity and they possessed the means to destroy the very fabric of the Pashtun agrarian economy.⁸⁹ However, from a Pashtun perspective, some felt the occupation, whilst irksome, could be contested and that they were honour-bound to sustain the resistance as long as the British remained there.

However, the fragmented nature of Pashtun society was beginning to have an effect. On 21 November 1897, the *jirgas* of the Malikdin Khel, Kambar-Khel, Adam-Khel and the Aka-Khel offered to accept the British terms, namely a fine, the restitution of property, the surrender of 800 rifles and a formal act of submission. Interestingly, the British Political Officers also used the opportunity to dispel the rumours which they felt had given rise to the unrest and to interrogate the tribesmen as to the reasons for the revolt. The tribesmen took the opportunity of blaming the mullahs, and this seemed to corroborate the idea of a conspiracy in the letters discovered in the house of Mullah Sayid Akbar. Sir Robert Warburton, an experienced Political Officer who later wrote about the Pathan Revolt, pointed to ‘the fifteen hundred mullahs from Ningrahar’.⁹⁰ However, Robert Bruce, another frontier Political Officer, rejected the idea of conspiracy and suggested that the interrogations revealed local grievances had been more important.⁹¹ The British were apt to see the determination of the resistance and the self-sacrificial nature of the fighters as evidence of ‘fanaticism’, but their millenarianism was, in fact an impassioned reaction to the changes they could see taking place around them as the British advanced into their territory, or, eroded their traditional way of life.⁹²

On 22 November, Lockhart set out to punish the Kuki-Khels and marched into their valley of Dwatoi. Again, the chief problem was sniping. The tribesmen clung to the high ground and withdrew if troops came too close. At night, they were able to fire into the British camp, and there were attacks on survey parties and against any formations that were withdrawing. Unusually, on one occasion the British prevented the tribesmen from

84. General Officer Commanding Tirah Expeditionary Force to Foreign Secretary, 17 November 1897, IOR L/PS/7/99.

85. Hutchinson, *Tirah*, p.115.

86. Hutchinson, *Tirah*, p.127.

87. Hutchinson, *Tirah*, p.128.

88. Lt Cowie, 1st Dorsets, letter dated 5 December 1897, DMM/1/220, Campaigns and Engagements, 1818-1898, Dorset Regiment Archive, The Keep Military Museum, Dorchester.

89. C.E. Calwell, *Small Wars: their Principles and Practice* (London, 1906 edn.), p.39.

90. Sir Robert Warburton, *Eighteen Years in the Khyber* (London: John Murray, 1900), pp.298-9.

91. R.I. Bruce, *The Forward Policy and its Results* (London: Longmans Green, 1900), pp.140-1.

92. Ahmed, *Millennium and Charisma*, p.105.

carrying away their dead and even captured some of their weapons. Then, there were further British successes. A party of 1st Gurkhas ambushed a group of Afridis who were lying in wait for a convoy near Unai. Five days later, a relief force cornered a group of over two hundred tribesmen and inflicted severe losses on them. Despite the defiant written response of the Massozais in the upper Khanki Valley, they capitulated readily when a British column arrived in their lands. The only stubborn resistance was offered by a group that held a *sangar* on a ridge above the valley, who refused to withdraw and were killed during an infantry assault by the Queen's Regiment. Why these men chose to stay and perish, and not to fight as guerrillas has not been ascertained, but it seems possible that they had chosen to die in the defence of their tribal homeland with the certainty of becoming martyrs. The Chamkanis, at the westernmost edge of the region and situated at the northern head of the Kurram Valley, also refused to surrender. They fought from ridgeline to ridgeline, pursued by the Gurkhas, until their leaders, Mirak Shah (Malik of the Khani Khels), Mahmud and Saidu, were killed. The tribesmen's fortifications at Thabi were destroyed and the Gurkhas withdrew without opposition. The collapse of resistance here suggests that local leadership was important.

The onset of bad weather indicated that the Tirah Field Force would have to withdraw, but it was decided they would march through the Bara and Waran Valleys in order to force the Zaka-Khels, the last group to defy Lockhart, to surrender or face a wave of destruction. It was hoped that the Zaka-Khels would not risk having their lands laid waste so close to winter, but, since the valleys were largely abandoned in the winter months in favour of lower pastures anyway, these expectations seem unrealistic. In the first week of December, the British began their descent in separate divisions, but the Afridis pressed the rearguards and flanks of the 2nd Division in the Bara Valley harder each day. Clearly they believed the British were now retreating, and unlikely to make a significant counter-attack. For the Pashtuns, who had often given way before each attack and then pursued the British, this was the opportunity they had been waiting for to inflict as many casualties as possible and avenge their losses. The cold weather and that fact that the column in the Bara Valley had to constantly cross and re-cross the frozen river had a detrimental effect on morale. Colonel Hutchinson noted that the camp followers suffered the most: 'many unhappy followers, frozen by the cold, and terrified by the bullets whistling overhead, collapsed and died by the way, in spite of the efforts of the escorts to keep them all together, and bring them safely along'.⁹³ The transport animals, which had not been in the best of health before the expedition and which had been worked hard for weeks, also let the British down. The snail's pace of their movement meant the rearguard was under greater pressure to hold on longer than they would have wished. Wounded men had to be carried by their comrades from the firing line because the *Dhoolie* (stretcher) bearers were exhausted. 'The wretched *kahars*', wrote Hutchinson, 'hardly able to carry the *dhoolies* when empty, seemed quite unable to bear them when loaded with the weight of a wounded man'.⁹⁴ The troops were tired by constant fighting. On 11 December, the Gordons, for example, were in action continuously from dawn until well after dark. The rearguard of 350 men under Major Downman was cut off and had to be relieved by two battalions and a battery of guns the following morning. They had suffered 50 casualties. The bad weather and temporary loss of the rearguard had caused the death of an unspecified number of followers, along with stores and baggage animals. The situation was beginning to 'look more like a rout than the victorious withdrawal of a punitive force'.⁹⁵

Heavy rain, sleet and the first dusting of snow added to the misery of the troops. As they established their picquets up to a mile on either side of the main column, they had to fight for each position. The tribesmen would watch them throwing up sangars, and then build some of their own in order to shoot at them through the night. An officer of the King's Own Scottish Borderers related how the Pashtuns grew more confident and tried to rush some

93. Hutchinson, *Tirah*, p.155.

94. Hutchinson, *Tirah*, pp.155-6.

95. Miller, *Khyber*, p.279. It is thought that circa 100 followers became casualties. General Officer Commanding Tirah Expeditionary Force to Adjutant-General in India, 12 December 1897, L/PS/7/99.

of these posts in the dark.⁹⁶ When this failed, tribesmen would engage the soldiers at close range, shout abuse and even throw rocks into their positions. These seem to have been an attempt to induce the soldiers to show themselves. Another tactic was to crawl up to a sentry, and, as he lunged over his parapet to bayonet the assailant, a pre-positioned marksman would shoot the soldier. The camp established every night was also under constant rifle fire and the tribesmen hoped that there would be more opportunities to acquire some of the baggage, rifles and stores. Every clan of the Afridis was, it seems, represented, and only a sustained barrage by mountain guns forced the tribesmen to break off their attack. Nevertheless sniping continued from a range of 2000 yards into the camp. On 13 December, after a halt to reorganise, the withdrawal recommenced and almost immediately the Afridis made a series of attacks. The tribesmen kept up by running parallel to the British axis and sought the most favourable positions to skirmish from. The flanks and rear were always under pressure, and while the British estimated that the Pashtuns had lost 300, their own casualties that day were about 76, not including camp followers and drivers. The baggage train became an ‘uncontrollable mass’ and the fighting was at such close quarters that medical officers marching alongside the wounded ‘became combatants in hand-to-hand struggles’.⁹⁷ Two days later, the British column had reached the edge of tribal territory and the harassment died away abruptly.

Ironically, the other division made its way out of the mountains virtually unopposed, suggesting the Afridis had made a conscious decision to concentrate their forces in one place. This seems to be confirmed by the fact that the British also sent a column to re-enter the Khyber Pass and for some days it was barely opposed at all. When two brigades entered the Bazar Valley, they were nevertheless engaged in constant fighting, the greatest resistance being offered to troops as they withdrew.⁹⁸ By 30 December, troops in the Khyber were under attack and a picquet of the Oxfordshire Light Infantry was badly mauled as it tried to withdraw at the end of the day’s observation. The growing threat, with tribesmen now clearly being diverted from the Bara Valley area, forced General Lockhart to send another brigade to the Khyber Pass. On 29 January, a force at Bara which had set out to intercept the tribesmen who were sheltering a large number of their animals in a hidden valley, failed to trap their prey. Instead, as they withdrew, they were subjected to an attack of several hundred Afridis.⁹⁹ The premature withdrawal of a picquet allowed the tribesmen to gain a vantage point and the position had to be retaken by the King’s Own Yorkshire Light Infantry. However, as soon as they regained the high ground, they found themselves overlooked by another ridge and were subjected to an increasingly intense fire from a range of 150 yards. With a number of the new picquet party wounded, it was impossible for them to pull back and they had to hold their ground, suffering more losses, whilst reinforcements were summoned. This incident indicates that, throughout the winter, the Afridis remained defiant and in possession of their own territory. Indeed, ‘desultory and indecisive fighting continued as before ... the two most recalcitrant maliks, Khwas Khan and Wali Muhammed Khan, from the safe haven of Afghanistan, [that is, within the Pashtun tribal belt beyond the British ‘Line’], exhorting [the tribesmen] to stand firm and to continue to resist’.¹⁰⁰

The British later explained the subsequent offer to submit to terms as evidence that the tribesmen were afraid of ‘another invasion in the spring’.¹⁰¹ It was claimed they had suffered ‘a blow to their prestige, ... material losses and ... hardships’. Yet, from a Pashtun perspective, there was no obvious loss of prestige. They had inflicted considerable losses on the British and exchanged blow for blow in a manner that would accrue them honour and credit. Individuals who had survived the campaign would have been recognised as having demonstrated courage in defence of their lands, peoples and religion. Physical destruction could be repaired. Crops and livestock could be replaced. The chance of another invasion was, to be sure, a concern to

96. From a letter by an Officer with the Picquet, F Company, KOSBs, cited in Hutchinson, *Tirah*, p.201.

97. Colonel L. James, High Pressure: Being Some Record of Activities in the Service of The Times Newspaper (London, 1929), p.43 cited in Moreman, *The Army in India*, p.67.

98. Wylly, *From Black Mountain to Waziristan*, p.336.

99. Hutchinson, *Tirah*, pp.166-7. Lieutenant General Sir A.P. Palmer to Chief of Staff, Tirah Expeditionary Force, 31 January 1898, IOR L/Mil/7/15899.

100. Wylly, *From Black Mountain to Waziristan*, p.336.

101. Hutchinson, *Tirah*, p.170.

be taken seriously, but the Pashtuns would no doubt have assumed that, if they negotiated at the end of the winter they were doing so from a position of strength. By April, all the tribes had come in to submit to the British terms.¹⁰²

The sense that the Pashtuns had actually enjoyed the campaign because it had offered them a chance to enhance their honour was confirmed by a bizarre epilogue to the Tirah Campaign. When General Lockhart set off to leave India in April 1898, a crowd of 500 Afridis including Zaka-Khels mobbed him with cheers and insisted on pulling his carriage to the station. Some vowed to fight alongside the British in the future and promised eternal friendship. To the Pashtuns, this campaign had not been a British victory, but a draw, and, more importantly, honour had been preserved for both sides. One officer noted that, during the months immediately succeeding the close of the campaign, ‘enlistment of Pathans, and especially of Afridis, into the regiments of the Indian Army, had never been brisker’.¹⁰³ If the Afridis wanted British pay, then the British certainly wanted the Afridis in their ranks. The India Office concurred with Lord Curzon’s thoughts on the need for a less aggressive policy in tribal territories: ‘...it has always been an axiom that the goodwill of the tribesmen affords the best guarantee for the success of a frontier policy... the friendly attitude of the frontier tribes would be of much greater moment than the absolute safety of any single pass, however important’.¹⁰⁴

Conclusions

Recent reinterpretations of Pashtun culture permit a fresh approach to the Pathan revolt of 1897-8 and the Tirah Campaign offers a fascinating case study of the frontier and the Pashtun ‘way of war’. In terms of the causes of the fighting, rumours, beliefs and myths combined to mobilise the population already fearful about British encroachments. The Revolt certainly needs to be seen in the context of the 1893 Durand Line agreement and the British Forward Policy, but it also needs to be understood as a specific tribal reaction to a world that was changing around them. Their tribal code was not fixed and immutable, despite the strength of its obligations, but permitted interpretation depending on the level of threat and crisis. Consequently, tribal groups responded differently to the revolt of 1897 and not all followed their charismatic mullahs blindly. Indeed, the tribesmen proved themselves capable of great tactical prowess in mountain warfare and an eminently pragmatic strategy.¹⁰⁵ It appears that the Pashtun tribesmen’s objectives were limited to the defence of their immediate territories. Their tactics and their overall strategies indicated an attempt to delay and check the British by the utilisation of the terrain and their relative strengths. It was not just a jihad that would drive out the infidels from the entire region, although the idea of Islam in danger coincided with local anxieties and acted as a means to mobilise the clans and sections of the frontier.

Afghanistan’s non-intervention was important, and some Pashtuns were prevented from joining the rising, but this simply empowered local leaders all the more. Tribesmen were quick to blame the mullahs for ‘forcing’ them to fight, and it seems that few of them wanted to run the risk of being the only one to defy their religious authorities. A collective pressure created a momentum that was hard to resist.

In light of the Tirah campaign, some British officers felt that the fighting on the North West Frontier had cost too much for results gained. Reflecting on future operations, Captain Nevill wrote: ‘To compel the surrender of guerrillas, such as the frontier tribes of India, by the usual process of breaking down the means of defence would entail operations so prolonged and costly as to be out of all proportion to the interests at stake. Other means therefore, must be found to achieve the same result, such as the destruction of villages and personal property, which has always been the only

102. Foreign Department Despatch, 69 of 1898 (Frontier): Settlement with the Afridis and the opening of the Khyber Pass, 5 May 1898, IOR L/PS/7/103.

103. Wylly, *From Black Mountain to Waziristan*, p.338.

104. India Office to Governor General of India, Secret Despatch no.18, 5 August 1898. IOR L/Mil/7/15919.

105. Colonel Thomas Holdich, *The Indian Borderland* (London: Methuen, 1900), p.362.

effective way of dealing with the elusive tribesmen'.¹⁰⁶ The financial cost of the Tirah campaign was £2.4 m, the same as the two-year long operations in the Sudan against the Khalifa's revolt, but when combined with the other operations on the North West Frontier, it represented a considerable burden on the Government of India's revenue. The cost in lives had also been high. The rank and file per company had been reduced by combat and sickness to just twenty men in some battalions.¹⁰⁷ The total British losses were 1150 of which 287 were killed. No figures were kept for the number of camp followers killed and wounded, and it is not known how many tribesmen were casualties either.

The 'Pathan Revolt' is a specific historical illustration of the nature of the Pashtun region astride the Durand Line, but it is one that has been dominated by Western conceptions. To the Pashtuns, the border line laid down by the British with Kabul's compliance did not exist and they saw no objection to an appeal to the Amir of Afghanistan when hard pressed. Whilst the causes of the revolt were attributed to fanaticism, a conspiracy of mullahs, or resistance to British encroachments, the sources of resistance appear to be evidence of the internal dynamics of a society confronted by change and seeking to exclude foreign influences. It interpreted the solutions to a foreign threat and a sense of crisis in religious terms and according to the guidance of their tribal code, but the Pashtuns pursued a more pragmatic policy. There was some pressure to respond to the crisis in a collective way, despite the fragmentary nature of their society, but some of these fissures were not entirely closed. Some clans opted to remain neutral and others were rather half-hearted. The Zakka-Khels by contrast believed their honour was at stake and they fought determinedly throughout the campaign. The best tributes came from their British adversaries, and the last word surely belongs to one of those who took part in the Tirah operations:

*We are too much accustomed to think of the tribes on our frontier as an undisciplined rabble to be treated with contempt, and brushed aside with ease, whenever we choose to advance against them in a lordly fashion. We have learned now that the conditions no longer exist which warranted such a belief. We have seen that the Afridis and Orakzais are as practically well armed as ourselves; ... that they can shoot as straight as our own men; that they can skirmish a great deal better than most of them; and that they are enterprising and bold, and thoroughly understand how to make the best use of the natural advantages which their woods and mountains and rocky defiles ... give them. Such a foe is to be treated with respect.*¹⁰⁸

106. Nevill, *Campaigns on the North West Frontier*, p.322.

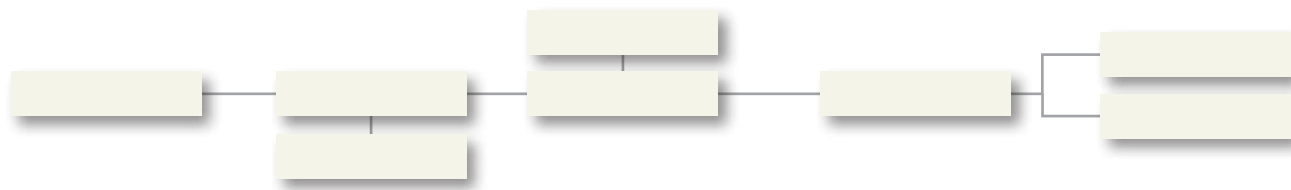
107. Hutchinson, *Tirah*, p.130.

108. Hutchinson, *Tirah*, pp.166-7.

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Traditional anthropological research conducted among tribes inhabiting remote areas where insurgents and criminals operate has become increasingly difficult to implement. Studies carried out among people living in small-scale societies now are nearly impossible due to the physical dangers associated with the civil and religious unrest found in those areas. Swat, for example, has become so dangerous that Frederick Barth's studies only could be repeated at the risk of the investigator's life. Similar research is not feasible among Burma's Rohingya tribes located on both sides of the border with Bangladesh, as well as with the Pashtuns in Afghanistan's interior and within Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas, where even Pakistan's army enters with reluctance.

Given the difficulties of conducting direct fieldwork in conflictive areas, the Tribal Analysis Center utilizes an indirect approach. Using multidisciplinary research, we seek to collect and analyze data obtained from a wide variety of sources, both current and historical. In the absence of new ethnographic fieldwork to update our base of knowledge, the Tribal Analysis Center compiles and summarizes existing research and documents on tribal societies, combining this material with contemporary press reports and articles. We assume that much can be gleaned from well-informed observers who are not anthropologists, ranging from journalists and travelers to government officials.



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