The Reign of King Amanullah, 1919-1929
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On February 20, 1919, Habibullah was assassinated on a hunting trip. He had not declared a succession, but left his third son, Amanullah, in charge in Kabul. Because Amanullah controlled both the national treasury and the army, he was well situated to seize power. Army support allowed Amanullah to suppress other claims and imprison those relatives who would not swear loyalty to him. Within a few months, the new amir had gained the allegiance of most tribal leaders and established control over the cities.

Third Anglo-Afghan War and Independence

Amanullah's ten years of reign initiated a period of dramatic change in Afghanistan in both foreign and domestic politics. Starting in May 1919 when he won complete independence in the month-long Third Anglo-Afghan War with Britain, Amanullah altered foreign policy in his new relations with external powers and transformed domestic politics with his social, political, and economic reforms. Although his reign ended abruptly, he achieved some notable successes, and his efforts failed as much due to the centripetal forces of tribal Afghanistan and the machinations of Russia and Britain as to any political folly on his part.

Amanullah came to power just as the entente between Russia and Britain broke down following the Russian Revolution of 1917. Once again Afghanistan provided a stage on which the great powers played out their schemes against one another. Amanullah attacked the British in May 1919 in two thrusts, taking them by surprise. Afghan forces achieved success in the early days of the war as Pashtun tribesmen on both sides of the border joined forces with them.

The military skirmishes soon ended in a stalemate as the British recovered from their initial surprise. Britain virtually dictated the terms of the 1919 Rawalpindi Agreement, a temporary armistice that provided, somewhat ambiguously, for Afghan self-determination in foreign affairs. Before final negotiations were concluded in 1921, however, Afghanistan had already begun to establish its own foreign policy, including diplomatic relations with the new government in the Soviet Union in 1919. During the 1920s, Afghanistan established diplomatic relations with most major countries, and Amanullah became king in 1923.

The second round of Anglo-Afghan negotiations for final peace were inconclusive. Both sides were prepared to agree on Afghan independence in foreign affairs, as provided for in the previous agreement. The two nations disagreed, however, on the issue that had plagued Anglo-Afghan relations for decades and would continue to cause friction for many more--authority over Pashtun tribes on both sides of the Durand Line. The British refused to concede Afghan control over the tribes on the British side of the line while the Afghans insisted on it. The Afghans regarded the 1921 agreement as only an informal one.

The rivalry of the great powers in the region might have remained subdued had it not been for the dramatic change in government in Moscow brought about by the Bolshevik Revolution of

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1917. In their efforts to placate Muslims within their borders, the new Soviet leaders were eager
to establish cordial relations with neighboring Muslim states. In the case of Afghanistan, the
Soviets could achieve a dual purpose: by strengthening relations with the leadership in Kabul,
they could also threaten Britain, which was one of the Western states supporting
counterrevolution in the Soviet Union. In his attempts to unclench British control of Afghan
foreign policy, Amanullah sent an emissary to Moscow in 1919; Lenin received the envoy
warmly and responded by sending a Soviet representative to Kabul to offer aid to Amanullah's
government.

Throughout Amanullah's reign, Soviet-Afghan relations fluctuated according Afghanistan's value
to the Soviet leadership at a given time; Afghanistan was either viewed as a tool for dealing with
Soviet Muslim minorities or for threatening the British. Whereas the Soviets sought Amanullah's
assistance in suppressing anti-Bolshevik elements in Central Asia in return for help against the
British, the Afghans were more interested in regaining lands across the Amu Darya lost to Russia
in the nineteenth century. Afghan attempts to regain the oases of Merv and Panjdeh were easily
subdued by the Soviet Red Army.

In May 1921, the Afghans and the Soviets signed a Treaty of Friendship, Afghanistan's first
international agreement since gaining full independence in 1919. The Soviets provided
Amanullah with aid in the form of cash, technology, and military equipment. Despite this,
Amanullah grew increasingly disillusioned with the Soviets, especially as he witnessed the
widening oppression of his fellow Muslims across the border.

Anglo-Afghan relations soured over British fear of an Afghan-Soviet friendship, especially with
the introduction of a few Soviet planes into Afghanistan. British unease increased when
Amanullah maintained contacts with Indian nationalists and gave them asylum in Kabul, and
also when he sought to stir up unrest among the Pashtun tribes across the border. The British
responded by refusing to address Amanullah as "Your Majesty," and imposing restrictions on the
transit of goods through India.