

Book Review

**Beyond the Khyber Pass: The Road to
British Disaster in the First Afghan War**

*By John H. Waller. Austin: University of Texas Press,
1990, 329 + xxxiii pp.*

John Waller, an American foreign service officer and retired inspector general of the CIA, is now an independent writer based in McLean, Virginia. He is also the author of *Gordon of Khartoum* and has travelled extensively in the Middle East and Asia. The book is beautifully illustrated with photographs of men, women, and events of the time, which

succeed in invoking visually the time period with which he is dealing: the First Afghan-British War.

This thirty-chapter book is the story of the British failure in Afghanistan in the 1840s, as Britain competed with Czarist Russia for strategic advantage in Central Asia. *Beyond the Khyber Pass* is a sweeping saga, chronicling the brutal wars and international intrigues of the nineteenth century in India, Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Russia—the “Great Game” that culminated in the siege of Kabul and the massacre of sixteen thousand British soldiers, their families, and camp followers in 1842, the year of the First Afghan-British War. Waller tells the tale of intrigue, treachery, and wild adventure with relish evident in the juicy anecdotes and asides.

It is always tempting to compare the British invasion of Afghanistan in the nineteenth century with that of the Soviet Union in 1979. But comparisons should not be taken too far. Certainly there were many similarities and differences between the two invasions. The common lesson in both cases was that foreign interference led to disasters for both the invader and the victim.

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