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Review of *The Wakhan Quadrangle: Exploration and Espionage During and After the Great Game* by Hermann Kreutzmann

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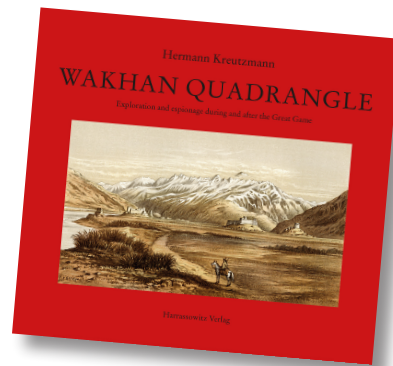
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***The Wakhan Quadrangle:
Exploration and Espionage During
and After the Great Game.***

Hermann Kreutzmann. Weisbaden:
Otto Harrassowitz, 2017. 282 pages.
ISBN 9783447108126.

Reviewed by John Mock

In 1837 British Lt. Arthur Conolly, in a letter to (then) Lt. Henry Rawlinson, first used the words “great game” to describe the competitive quest for knowledge and power in Central Asia between the Russian and British empires of the nineteenth century.

Conolly was executed in Bokhara in 1842. Rawlinson became a Major-General, was knighted, and served as President of the Royal Geographical Society. It was a high risk-high reward game in which the acquisition of knowledge formed the basis for political action. The locus for much of this “exploration and espionage” were two great geographical unknowns: the source of the Amu Darya (Oxus River) and the geography of the Pamir Mountains. The process of the extension of control over remote and unknown territory led to the “discovery” of the small independent state of Wakhan and the Wakhi people inhabiting it, which is the focus of Hermann Kreutzmann’s book. As Kreutzmann rightly points out, the reports, maps, gazetteers, and memoranda which the European empires produced reveal the outlines of their classificatory grids as purposeful abstractions that blur the reality of not only Wakhi and Pamiri peoples, but also the identity and role of the “indigenous intermediaries” who served as knowledge collectors for their imperial masters.

The Wakhan Quadrangle richly documents the historical and institutional context of this deliberate knowledge production during the latter quarter of the nineteenth century and up to the conclusion of the Anglo-Russian Convention in 1907. At the center of the book and contextually supported by Kreutzmann’s extensive archival research in London and St. Petersburg, is a photographic reproduction of the

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rare but highly informative 64-page "Journey to Badakhshan, with report on Badakhshan and Wakhan" by Munshi Abdul Rahim.

Abdul Rahim was one of the "indigenous intermediaries," generally termed Pandits, who collectively, over a twenty-year period, surveyed and mapped the territory beyond the Indian frontier. Unlike his fellow Pandits, Abdul Rahim was not sent by the Great Trigonometrical Survey of India, but instead was commissioned by (then) Maj. John Biddulph when he was Officer on Special Duty in charge of the first Gilgit Agency, 1877-1881. Abdul Rahim departed Gilgit in November 1879, journeyed through the Yasin Valley and over the Darkot and Broghil passes to Sarhad-e Wakhan, thence down the Panj River through Wakhan to Ishkashim. He continued to Zebak and reached Faizabad, the capital of Badakhshan, in January 1880. He returned in the spring via the same route to Sarhad-e Wakhan, thence down the Yarkhun River to Mastuj, and over the Shandur Pass to Gilgit.

Kreutzmann provides a brief foreword followed by an introduction to the geography and geopolitics of the area, emphasizing and elucidating the imperial parsing and processing of knowledge gained through the "data collectors under remote control" (p. 29). The following chapter, "Missions with An Aim," delves into the European and Asian actors on this stage. Kreutzmann notes that Abdul Rahim's journey

came at a crucial time for Wakhan and Badakhshan, just prior to the extension of control by the Amir of Afghanistan, Abdur Rahman, over Badakhshan, and the departure of the last Mir of Wakhan, Ali Mardan Shah, for British-controlled territory. The latter two-thirds of the chapter discuss the topics of Munshi Abdul Rahim's report, providing valuable context on and useful discussion of what changed subsequently. The topics include, among many, ethnography, politics, economy, trade within the region, religion, authority and rule, climate, lineages of the Mirs of Wakhan, Badakhshan and Qataghan, and the obligatory detailed route descriptions.

With the context laid out, the reader is then treated to the color reproduction of Munshi Abdul Rahim's Report. Although the English language version we read is the product of an unidentified translator of the original Persian manuscript (which has not been located), the detail and precision begins to give an impression of the personality and perceptiveness of Abdul Rahim. Missing, as Kreutzmann points out, is the Wakhi vocabulary recorded by Abdul Rahim. Titled *Dictionary of the Wakhani Language*, it is fifteen pages with 378 words plus names of days of the week, solar and lunar months, and a description in Persian of the Wakhi vigesimal numerical system.

Those interested in the Great Game and the history of British India, Afghanistan, Russian Central Asia, and western China will find much

of interest in the Report. It is, interestingly, these four powers at the specific time of Abdul Rahim's journey that prompt the geometric metaphor of the book title. Wakhan formed a quadrangle between these four powers that was soon demarcated and partitioned, with the northern side of the Panj River going to Russia and the southern side to Afghanistan, thereby forming a narrow buffer strip to separate Russian and British spheres of influence. The quadrangle became a corridor whose eastern end was later sealed by the Chinese Revolution, leaving Wakhan as a cul-de-sac connected only to Afghanistan.

Kreutzmann addresses the aftermath of the partition of Wakhan in his sequel and postscript. The lives and fates of the "indigenous intermediaries" are revealed and illuminated, almost like a prayer over their graves. This is perhaps the greatest contribution of the book, although the reader will also revel in the documentation, illustrations and photographs that illuminate every page of Kreutzmann's text. Of special note are the many maps, almost all from Markus Hauser's remarkable Pamir Archive Collection. Most are reproduced full-page, but those who would like to examine them in detail may find the e-book version allows easier viewing at a larger size.

The book is in many ways a companion volume to Kreutzmann's monumental 2015 opus, *Pamirian Crossroads* (Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden), as readers of the present volume who examine the

endnotes will discern. Complete references to original sources can be found in the much larger and more detailed 2015 book.

Like any book, there are authorial idiosyncrasies and lacunae, such as the Anglicization of the indigenous noun and adjective “pamir” and “pamiri” into the neologism “Pamirian” (there has never been a “Pamiria”) or the inevitable result of the specific temporal focus of the book, which precludes any substantial discussion of the earlier imperial “great games” played by the Kushan, Han, Tang, and Tibetan empires on the same ground. A notable casualty is the historical existence of Palola or Bolor, which is well-documented through the scholarship of Oskar von Hinüber and more recently of Dieter Schuh. But these are minor points and do not detract from the overall appeal of the book. Perhaps most useful will be a contemporary reading of the book to discern parallels and common causal threads that continue in Central Asia today, which some have called a new Great Game in the making.

John Mock is affiliated with the University of California, Santa Cruz, where he served as Lecturer in Hindi and Urdu. He is currently a Trustee and elected Secretary of the American Institute of Afghanistan Studies and has published on the heritage conservation, oral traditions, ethnoarchaeology and historical archaeology of Wakhan.