

## HISTORY

# Afghanistan's Fateful Border

**THE SOURCE:** "The Man Who Drew the Fatal Durand Line" by David Rose, in *Standpoint*, March 2011.

WHEN SIR HENRY MORTIMER Durand left Kabul in the autumn of 1893, his fellow Britons showered him with hosannas. Durand, then serving as foreign secretary of Britain's Indian colony, had succeeded in negotiating the first "scientific frontier" between what are now Pakistan and Afghanistan, a crucial victory in British efforts to contain Russian expansionism. Queen Victoria herself telegraphed congratulations.

Fears of Russian encroachment into Afghanistan had sparked two wars with the Afghans, in 1839–42 and 1878–80, and the British believed that drawing a well-defined frontier and befriending Afghanistan's "Iron Amir," Abdur Rehman Khan (with the help of plenty of cash), would make the country an effective buffer between Russia and British India. A deeper motive was also at work. The British were haunted by the bloody Indian Mutiny of 1857—Durand himself had lost his mother in the conflict—and were convinced that taking decisive steps against the Russians would disabuse the Indians of any notions of British weak-



Sir Henry Mortimer Durand cut a fine figure, but he made a mess of cutting a border between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

ness. Durand's biographer wrote in 1926 that "generations yet unborn will benefit from the Durand Line that he negotiated."

Of course, it didn't turn out that way. "If Durand had not produced his frontier," writes journalist David Rose, "the conflicts that have plagued the region since the Soviet invasion of 1979 might never have occurred."

Dubbed "the strongest man

in the Empire" by London's *Spectator*, the extravagantly mustachioed Durand was typical of imperial Britons in his slight regard for the people under his sway. In drawing a line through 1,200 miles of some of the world's most rugged terrain, "it simply did not occur to Durand that the [native] Pashtuns would object," Rose says. When Abdur Rehman complained during the 1893 negotiations about losing the Waziristan region, for example, Durand gave him half of it—noting breezily in his journal, "he will have a bit of Wazir country."

The Pashtun ties of clan, tribe, and faith were far denser than the British understood. Barely more than three years after Durand's triumphant departure from Kabul, Abdur Rehman convened a meeting of Pashtun mullahs who subsequently crossed back into British India with Afghan arms and launched the violent jihad of 1897, convulsing most of the northwest frontier. It was only the beginning.

In addition to igniting pro-"Pashtunist" feeling, the Durand Line contributed to the radicalization of Pashtun Islam. With the jihad of 1897, Rose says, the teachings of Pashtun scholar-priests "decisively changed direction," away from their traditional Sufi-inspired emphasis on "the individual's contemplative relationship with God, and toward one emphasizing strict observance and obedience." Increasingly, militant Islam "provided tribal leaders with their vocabulary and their ideological rallying point."

The British compounded their mistake after the 1897 jihad by granting the rebellious tribes in the region between the Durand Line and the rest of British India semi-autonomous status. These areas promptly became jihadist breeding grounds and to-

day, as largely ungovernable parts of Pakistan, serve as safe havens for Afghan insurgents and Pakistani Taliban. One of the Afghan Taliban's deadliest elements, the Haqqani network, makes its home in the bit of Waziristan that Durand kept for Britain.

ture of free will. Ask a dozen philosophers why slavery is wrong, and you'll get 12 different explanations. Philosophy "morphs and transforms to stay current," Dietrich says, but the underlying questions are pretty much the same.

Why can't philosophy give definitive answers? Dietrich believes that the multiple viewpoints humans can adopt are the essential reason. One "No-Progress" philosopher, Thomas Nagel of New York University, sees the problem as arising from the contradiction between objective and subjective points of view. Based on their own experience, lots of people strongly believe that humans possess free will. Taking a longer view of history, however, may lead one to doubt that conclusion.

University of Miami philosophy professor Colin McGinn has argued that philosophical problems are solvable in principle—just not by us. In McGinn's eyes, humans are comparable to dogs when it comes to their grasp of the world around them, philosophically speaking: We understand a little bit of what's going on, but the real language used to articulate what's happening is beyond us.

There's some consolation, then, in Dietrich's assertion that his field has accomplished virtually nothing since its inception: It simply couldn't be any other way. "In philosophy, clashing points of view are ineluctable, and their existence is the only truth."

## RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

# Philosophy's Inertia

**THE SOURCE:** "There Is No Progress in Philosophy" by Eric Dietrich, in *Essays in Philosophy*, July 2011.

WESTERN PHILOSOPHY SEEMS to have had a pretty clear evolution: from Plato to Descartes to Kant to Wittgenstein. Eric Dietrich, a philosophy professor at the State University of New York, Binghamton, begs to differ. "Philosophy is, except for some modernizing, exactly the same now as it has ever been. It has not progressed one iota," he argues. And he's no renegade—a number of his peers agree.

Compare the trajectory of philosophy with that of the hard sciences. If Aristotle were to sit in on an elementary college physics class, he would be mystified by some of the basic concepts—equations, gravity—tossed around by the students. Yet he would feel very much at home in an introductory philosophy class, where his works continue to command a spot on the syllabus. People

are still grappling to understand some of the phenomena Aristotle wrestled with 2,400 years ago.

Of course, a few philosophical advances have gained traction since the agora's heyday, such as modal logic, which formalizes considerations of necessity and probability. But there is no "deep and widespread agreement" on—much less answers to—the essential questions the discipline faces, such as the na-

**Philosophy has been set in stone since the days of Aristotle, argues one scholar.**

