

---

Mark Simner. *Chitral 1895: An Episode of the Great Game*. England: Fonthill Media Limited, 2017.

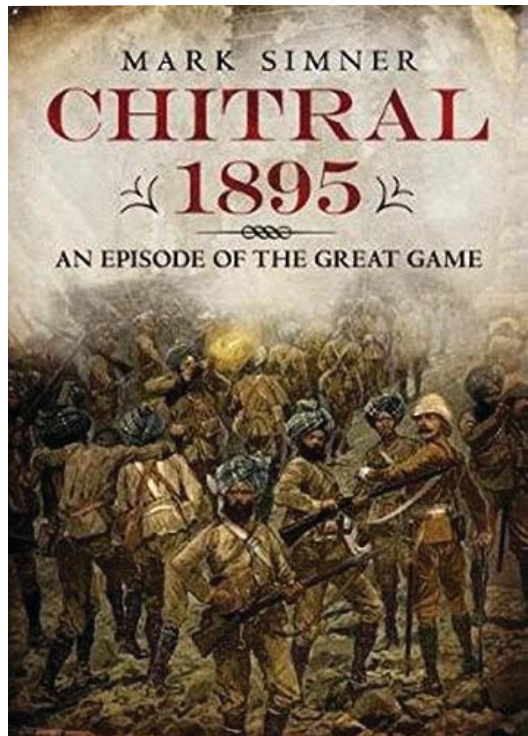
Book Review

---

Chris Schloemer

---

The remote mountainous area of the Hindu Kush in northwest Pakistan and northeast Afghanistan is one of the most desolate and inaccessible on earth. For centuries, tribes have dominated it. Even now, the governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan have little leverage there. Because of this, Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda, as well as the Taliban, have used it as a base of operation, holing up in the highly inaccessible mountains. In the late 1800s, the area interested Great Britain. Mark Simner, in his book, *Chitral 1895: An Episode of the Great Game*, relates the importance of this area to the British and the difficulties British and Indian soldiers had dealing with the tribes there. The area, in what is now Pakistan, really had no national interest to Britain, except in its “Great Game” to prevent Russia and China access to India (p. 15). This resulted in a conflict in which a small force of British soldiers and allies holed up in an old, dilapidated fort, held out for forty-eight days under siege while the British mounted two separate relief efforts to save them. This book brilliantly depicts the difficulties in mounting a campaign and attempting to pacify this volatile, inaccessible region and the resulting strife the attempted pacification caused.



So where is Chitral? Initially, Simner describes it as in the far northwest border of Pakistan (then part of British India), just east of the far northeast border of Afghanistan. Geographically, it was near the point where the British, Russian, and Chinese empires of the period met. Maps provided help to orient the reader. Using quotes from British army officers of the time, the reader gets a feel for the remoteness of this desolate area, tucked into majestic mountain peaks. Travel was difficult and dangerous, especially in crossing periodically torrential rivers, sometimes using cantilever bridges when available, but often only accessible by precarious rope bridges. It was a difficult area to live in, much less fight in (p. 21). Furthermore, the people did not conform to British ideas.

Simner provides the reader with British military officers' varied descriptions of the native peoples, describing their treachery, tribal leaders' ambitions, dealings through bribes and temporary alliances, and propensity to assassinate each other and participate in power struggles. Conversely, the officers also described their kindness and love for music and dancing (p. 22). This gives the reader much information showing who the British thought they were dealing with.

In the 1880s and 90s, the British came into increased contact with the tribes of the area while exploring passes through the mountains and encountered Russian Cossack troops doing the same thing. This is where Simner presents the area as important in the "Victorian era cold war between the ever-expanding British and Russian empires (p. 28)." Without this cold war emphasis, the British may never have been interested in the area at all, but they believed the Russians were interested in "pushing the Chitrali door to India wide open (p. 28)." The common use of bribes with money and weapons gained the British an unsteady foothold in the area. Ruled by a *mehtar* (king), Chitral was constantly torn by inter and intra-tribal conflict.

The area was regularly contested by Chitrali, Afghani, Pathan, and Kashmiri rulers. After a strong *mehtar*, a British ally (of course for a price), died in 1892, a bloody conflict for accession began in Chitral. The British did not want to get involved, but one son gained the capital and sought British recognition, getting it by agreeing to his father's terms. This accession struggle precipitated the campaigns that are the meat of this book. The new *mehtar* was not strong, nor respected by the locals. Before he took the capital, the fleeing leaders looted the treasury and armory. This weak leader, without money to bribe or arms to cow, was in a difficult situation, as were the British, who had committed themselves to him. Chitrali groups, Pathans, and others saw an opportunity in this power vacuum.

Chitrali rebel factions and Pathan allies killed the new *mehtar*, installed a puppet *mehtar*, and the Pathans moved an army towards Chitral. A small force of

the British, under the political control of Surgeon General Robertson and the military control of Captain Townshend, already in Chitral, were forced to hole up in the town's fort. The besiegers tried to entreat with the besieged, all the while moving their entrenchments closer and closer.

Simner describes two local relief attempts. Both failed. The first, the Defence of Reshun, involved a small force of British soldiers, with Bengal Sappers and Kashmiri Infantry that tried to make their way some sixty miles to Chitral to consolidate with General Robertson's force. They were waylaid at Reshun, their force dispersed, and their two British officers taken hostage. The second, the Koragh disaster, was an expedition of a force of Sikh troops, led by a British officer, to help the force in Reshun. The officer ignored the warnings of locals and marched directly into a trap. His force was destroyed and he was killed. Only a few escaped to tell the story. This left the defenders of the fort on their own.

In Chitral, the conglomeration of tribes settled down to besiege the beleaguered defenders. The British defenders were amazed that their enemies did not overwhelm them, believing they could have been overrun at any time. Anywhere from three to five thousand tribesmen besieged about four hundred Sikh, Kashmiri, and Chitrali (of dubious loyalty) soldiers supervised by a small number of British. However, the Chitrali and Pathan besiegers tried to coax the defenders out with promises and potential agreements, while simultaneously trying to find a weak point in the fort's walls. The tribesmen still respected the might of the British Empire, preferring recognition rather than destroying the defenders and facing British repercussions. Much of the book recounts the actions of the besiegers against the defenders' valiant efforts to prevent the fort's fall. Meanwhile, the British were sending reinforcements.

A small force came from the east through a barren, mountainous region. Despite the difficult terrain, Lieutenant Colonel Kelly, with a force of about five hundred men and two pieces of artillery, made his way through. They began on 24 March 1895, slowed by heavy snow and exposed to snow blindness and frostbite, methodically making their way towards Chitral. The British artillery was invaluable, blasting the enemy out of entrenched positions along the way. On 20 April, Kelly and his men relieved the fort, after a journey of three hundred fifty gruelling miles in thirty-five days performed in some of the toughest weather conditions.

A much larger force came from the south. Major General Low led this force of over fifteen thousand soldiers and over twenty thousand porters and animals carrying supplies. This large force was meant to send a message to the

tribes (and possibly Russia). However, it was a march through some of the most inhospitable terrain imaginable, and through the Swat Valley, where numerous hostile Pathan tribes opposed them. General Low pressed on, despite facing heavy resistance. This was the Pathan homeland. They saw this as an invasion. Again, the British artillery was key, displacing entrenched enemies. The British force also performed numerous engineering feats, such as improving roads and building bridges. As this large force approached Chitral, the British officer hostages were released and the Pathan and Chitrali leaders that did not flee from Kelly's force wanted to come to terms.

Those who fought saw this conflict as a series of minor skirmishes, but its results had later implications. Simner recounts how the new *Mehmet* installed led a peaceable reign of over forty years. However, Indian authorities decided they either needed better access to Chitral or had to abandon it. Due to fears of Russian intervention, they decided on the former. They built a road and outposts through the Swat Valley. Two years later, the Pathans, resentful of occupying forces in their territory, rose up. Although many Pathans had fought against General Low, most did not because he had told them the British just wanted to pass through Swat, not occupy it. The British finally put down the rebellion at great cost in money and lives. Afterwards, they abandoned the Swat outposts.

This is an excellent book for those interested in this area of the world. It is a bit technical and in-depth for the casual reader. It can be a bit dry at times and hard to follow if one is not familiar with the area. The many tribal names and areas are difficult to navigate. The book does have some vital maps. Larger maps would have been helpful. Excellent pictures and drawings included in the book show the reader just how difficult the terrain was. The pictures really enhance the book and his descriptions of the campaigns, giving the reader a great sense of the environmental difficulties that armies had in traveling and fighting in these mountainous areas.

It is in the details of the siege and campaigns that Simner excels. The reader really gets a feel for what these men went through and how disciplined and efficient the British military machine was, especially against tribes with varying motivations to fight. His descriptions of troop movements and actions are very detailed. Simner uses many sources directly from those involved and others from the time period covered. Accounts written by Surgeon General Robertson, who had political control of the besieged defenders at the fort, as well as accounts written by the British officers held hostage after the Defence of Reshun, Lieutenants Edwardes and Fowler, and newspaper accounts from the period, help give the book authenticity. These primary sources enhance the narrative.

*Chitral 1895* gives a good idea of what it takes to try to pacify and control these mountain areas. During the siege of Chitral and its aftermath, many soldiers, tribesmen, and civilians lost their lives or their livelihoods. It was hard enough just to survive in this desolate terrain. In the end, the locals suffered and the tough British troops prevailed. If not for the “Great Game” between the Victorian British and Russian empires, this era of attempted pacification and conflict, costly both in lives and money, would never have happened. Control of the Hindu Kush is still a challenge in modern times. Many modern forces, including the USSR, have attempted it with great difficulty and little success. The United States has had difficulty tracking and fighting Al Qaeda and Taliban forces there. The book gives great insight into an area and historical period that many have never delved into.