
One of the most striking aspects of the East India Company’s domination of the subcontinent throughout the latter part of the eighteenth century was the fragility upon which it was based. Massively outnumbered by an often hostile and certainly resentful populace, the officers of the Company defended themselves with the same locals in the form of a native *sepoy* army. Disliked by native princes and merchants, valuable trade agreements were revoked and coercion applied with a “moral elasticity”\(^1\) that pitted rivals against each other. When force was needed, it was defended with indignation in Calcutta and in London.

The internal vulnerability, however, was not the cause of the greatest concern. The greatest threat to British domination of India was Russia. Separated by the largely unknown territories of Afghānistān and central Asia, these two great nations puffed out their respective chests. By the mid-nineteenth century, the question was not if Russia would invade but when and how. Throughout the latter half of the same century, British empire-makers were preoccupied by this single inexorable question.

Central to the British defense of its dominion was military intelligence. This was in part generated through a band of industrious and courageous young men. Most were army officers, skilled in local languages, who would take a land route through Europe and into India in order to chart and classify the terrain and peoples that formed the potent threat to security. When Alexander Burns, an extraordinary linguist and engaging personality, was dispatched in 1831 with the seemingly innocuous mission to deliver a gift of six
dapple-gray drayhorses from William IV to Mahārājā Ranjit Singh, he kept
an impressive diary of his travels with an extraordinary eye for military detail.
As he sailed up the Indus to Lahore, he noted the path for future British
conquest as well as vulnerabilities in potential defenses.

This was a high-risk occupation, but the wheeze of gathering military and
logistical intelligence through seemingly innocent travels was a huge draw
for young men with steel nerves and a taste for adventure. The Great Game
was born.

The phrase “The Great Game” was coined in 1841 by Arthur Connolly
(1807–1842), but its practitioners had been “playing” for a great deal longer
than that. Some of the earliest pioneers were the late-eighteenth century
travelers spurned on by travel and adventure rather than for the purposes of
spying. One such man was George Forster (d. 1792). Of his early life very
little is known, but what can be ascertained is that by 1782 he was a civil ser­
vant in the Madras establishment of the East India Company. An unlikely
adventurer, in 1782 he traveled from India through Kashmir, Afghanistān,
Herat, Persia, by the Caspian Sea into Russia. It seems that the Sikh incursions
into Delhi and the Ganga doab had sufficiently alarmed the East India
Company for them to perceive the Sikhs as a frustration on their designs.
The governor-general, Warren Hastings quickly responded with a slew of
intelligence gathering exercises, many of which centered on the Sikhs: James
Browne (part II, chapter 9), Sayyid Ghulām Hussain (part VI, chapter 32),
and George Forster were all charged with studying their history and relaying
back to himself and the directors. Forster was dispatched to travel across the
Sikh territory disguised as a Muslim horse trader.

Forster’s memoirs from that journey were published posthumously in two
volumes as A Journey from Bengal to England through the Northern Part of
India, Kashmire, Afghanistan, and Persia; and into Russia, by the Caspian
Sea (London: Printed for R. Faulder, 1798). In 1785, Forster wrote a
detailed letter, essentially a draft for the chapter on the Sikhs in A Journey
from Bengal. This letter was sent to a Mr. Gregory and is marked “Charlotte
Street, Portland Place, 9 June 1785.” The extract relating to the Sikhs and
the Punjab were observations made by Forster between February and April
1783, some nine months after he had left Calcutta.

Soon after the British failed to get the possession of Orissā from the
Marāthās, Warren Hasting’s departed his position as governor-general. Lord
Cornwallis his successor opened negotiations for defensive alliance with the
Marāthā chief by sending George Forster to Nāgpur. Forster’s attempt was
unsuccessful and it was in Nāgpur during that failed mission that Forster died
in 1792.

One of the longest of the accounts to predate Malcolm’s Sketch of the Sikhs
(London: John Murray, 1812), Forster gives an intimate and personal
account of his travel and his acquaintance with Sikhs. Unlike many of the
empire builders and military men, Forster was courageous enough to share
his fears of the unknown with his reader. It is with visible relief that Forster
writes that “unhurt by the Sicques, tigers, or thieves, I am safely lodged in