In 1855, during the height of the Crimean War, Great Britain found herself in conflict with Persia, due to the Shah’s unfounded claim to the independent Afghan Emirate of Herat. When it became clear that Great Britain had not succeeded in solving the contradictions and controversies caused by that claim, nor had she been able to convince the Shah to abandon the idea of annexing Herat, the Anglo-Persian conflict turned into a full-scale war. Britain’s vital interests necessitated paying close attention to the problem of Herat, which had begun in the 1820s and since then been the cause of repeated and acute crises in Anglo-Persian relations. Great Britain considered Herat “a stronghold of her East-India possessions”1 and during many years, till the first world war, attempted to keep it under strong control.

After the dismemberment of the united Afghan state (Durrani)—an empire under the rule of the Sadozai dynasty (1747–1818)—Herat had become an independent principality (emirate). Its ruler, Mahmud Shah, who was the last Shah of the Sadozai dynasty, turned to Great Britain requesting her patronage and help. From then on London was the guarantor of Herat’s independence and territorial integrity that was threatened by the ruler of Kabul, Emir Dost Muhammad Khan, as well as the Shahs of Persia. The latter were backed by Russia, who opposed the British holdings in India and hoped to block British infiltration into Central Asian markets (Bokhara, Khiva, Kokand), markets which Russia wanted for herself without any outside competition.2

In the middle of the 19th century the Herat problem was in the center of Anglo-Russian rivalries for control over the North-Persian, Afghan and Central Asian markets.

The year 1853 was an important date in the history of the Herat problem. In January of that year, when Great Britain had once more been faced with a new relapse of the “Herat illness” of the Persian
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Shahs, she insisted on the signing of an Anglo-Persian treaty, including an unequivocal undertaking by Persia not to interfere in Herat's affairs, unless the latter was threatened by Kabul.

The Crimean War broke out soon afterwards. Initially the Shah openly flirted with Russia, offering a military alliance in exchange for the Russian agreement to Persia's increasing her territorial possessions at the expense of Turkey and Afghanistan. When Great Britain and France joined the Crimean War the Shah changed his position and began to try his luck with the Allies. His overtures were received very coldly; the British government advised him to remain neutral and stressed that this concept of neutrality included the strict adherence by Persia to the spirit and letter of the Anglo-Persian treaty of 25 January 1853.4

The unbending British position provoked a storm of indignation in Teheran, and the Shah began to look for ways to avenge the insult to his pride. An open flirtation with France followed. The latter having resumed diplomatic relations with Persia after an interval of five years. Simultaneously the Shah began to flirt with the United States, offering both of them trade and political agreements.

In the fall of 1855 the tension between Persia and Great Britain reached a peak, due to the events in Afghanistan. According to the Shah the situation freed him from the obligations he had agreed to on 25 January 1853. In the autumn of 1855, important events were taking place simultaneously in Herat and in Kandahar, the centre of the other independent Afghan principality. After a coup in the Herat court in October 1855, the British orientated ruler of Herat, Sayyed Muhammad Khan, was deposed. It was soon clear that Teheran manipulated the plot. The man who replaced the ruler of Herat, Prince Muhammad Yussuf, had been living in Persia at the Shah's expense. At the same time Kohendil Khan, the ruler of Kandahar and a brother of Dost Muhammad Khan, died. The latter annexed Kandahar in November 1855 with Britain's agreement, on the strength of the Anglo-Kabul treaty of 30 March 1855 which included clauses of "permanent peace and friendship."

The news of the occupation of Kandahar by Kabul forces created a great uproar in Teheran and Herat. Muhammad Yussuf despatched a panicky letter to the Shah, entreating him to protect Herat from the aggressive aspirations of Dost Muhammad, and the Shah ordered preparations for an immediate campaign against Dost Muhammad.1

The Shah's behaviour put a further strain on Anglo-Persian relations, bringing them close to breaking-point. The reason was soon apparent. In parallel a strong controversy developed between the Persian and the British Mission in Teheran due to the nomination of a Persian subject, a certain Hashim Khan, to the post of secretary of the
British Mission. The Shah’s government objected to the nomination, Hashim Khan was threatened with serious trouble, and his wife, who was a sister of the Shah’s wife, was detained in the Shah’s palace. The British Mission protested very strongly. This was followed by an exchange of harshly worded notes between Sir Charles Murray, the British Minister Plenipotentiary, and the Persian First Minister, Mirza Agha Khan Nuri. The Shah’s court began to spread damaging personal gossip about Sir Charles, who, it was whispered, had an intimate liaison with Hashim Khan’s wife. After the demand of the British minister that the insinuations that were harmful to Britain ceased, the Persian government replied with even harsher and more offensive expressions against Great Britain and her representative in Teheran. On the 19 November 1855 Murray announced the breaking off of Anglo-Persian relations, and on 5 December he left Teheran. Throughout he had acted with complete obedience to the instructions of his government.

In the meantime preparations for a Persian campaign against Dost Muhammad were in full swing. On 9 December 1855 the official Teheran newspaper announced that Dost Muhammad allegedly intended not only to annex Herat (which alone was a sufficient reason for sending Persian troops to the assistance of the Heratians) but also to provoke an anti-government movement in Persian Baluchistan, Kerman and Sistan: “The Persian force are going to the help of Herat, to protect it against attacks by Dost Muhammad, but not in order to take possession of that city.”

In February 1856 the Persian cavalry vanguard, commanded by Sami Khan, approached Herat. Muhammad Yussuf gave orders to let him enter the city, intending to make use of Persian soldiers in his struggle against the pro-Kabul elements, which had become very active under their leader, Issa Khan. Contrary to his hopes, the appearance of Persian soldiers in Herat accelerated their anti-Persian activities. While the main forces of the Persian army were approaching Herat an anti-Persian uprising occurred inside the city. Muhammad Yussuf was deposed and exiled, and the power was seized by Issa Khan, who immediately turned to the Anglo-Indian government with a request for help. The British authorities in India gave their agreement and turned to Dost Muhammad with an offer that he should send some of his forces to assist the Heratians and to hand over to them part of the military equipment and money which he had received under the 1855 treaty. Dost Muhammad willingly agreed to the British request.

Battles began to rage around Herat. The defenders of the city offered strong resistance to the Persian forces and succeeded in forcing them to negotiate. It did not take long to make the Shah realize the
complexity of the situation. According to Prince A. M. Gorchakov, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Shah "was trembling before Great Britain and was in a hurry to begin negotiations with her." On 10 April 1856 the Persian Chargé d'Affaires in Constantinople turned to the British ambassador, Lord Stratford de Redcliffe, with an offer to smooth out the conflict through diplomatic channels, and to renew normal relations between the two countries. However the battles in the region of Herat had not ceased, nor had the outbursts and propaganda against Great Britain and her monarch. Those facts were sufficient to convince the British government of the insincerity of the Shah and his Prime Minister.

British government circles were gradually becoming convinced that nothing but a major military action against Persia would restore order. The international situation at that time made this possible, since the Crimean War had been favourably concluded, and Russia, who had sustained a total defeat, was in no position to send any tangible help to Persia. The government in London was convinced that only a military action would teach the Shah to give up his habit of trying to annex Herat and not to interfere in Afghan affairs.

Nevertheless contacts continued between British and Persian diplomats in Constantinople throughout the spring and summer of 1856. Lord Stratford was advised not to force anything in those negotiations and to maintain a waiting position. The Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Lord Clarendon, had written to him: "The Eastern affairs will not lose anything if decided without haste, and the Persians will be alarmed rather than soothed by our indifference." 8

Contrary to London's expectations, Persia adopted an unyielding position. When London demanded that Persia take her forces out of Herat, Teheran replied by demanding that the British-manipulated Kabul forces be recalled from Kandahar. On 2 August 1856 Palmerston wrote to Clarendon, that war with Persia could not be avoided. British patience came to an end when on 26 October 1856 Persian forces stormed and occupied Herat despite Lord Stratford's warning that the occupation of Herat would have serious consequences and would make the Anglo-Persian negotiations, intended to iron out their differences, "altogether useless". 9 London had already ordered Calcutta to despatch a squadron to the Persian Gulf in a communication sent on 26 September 1856. A month later the British consuls in Teheran and Tabriz were instructed to leave Persian territory. On 1 November 1856 the Governor-General of India, Lord Canning, published an official proclamation declaring war on Persia. On 29 November 1856 the British squadron appeared off the coast of Bushir, and on 4 December the British took possession of Kharak. On 10 December Bushir capitulated. In the course of Feb-
ruary and March the British took possession of Mohammara and of Ahwaz, and hostilities ceased on 5 April although a peace treaty had been signed in Paris a month earlier, on 4 March 1857.

The Shah and his ministers aimed at assuring the best possible international position for Persia, by provoking Great Britain and thus isolating her as far as possible. It was with that purpose that the Shah began the earlier mentioned flirtation with France, indicating uncommon foresight. Bourré, the French minister in Persia, commented: “To the Persians, France never was and never will be anything else than the natural enemy of Great Britain and the future ally of Russia”. The French diplomat did not contradict the Shah’s view and, on the contrary, he strengthened it, telling him that his attitude was right and reflected the real state of affairs. He adopted a directly inimical position towards Great Britain, and when the conflict between the British Mission and the Persian government reached serious proportions, he wrote a letter to Murray on the 19 November 1855 advising him to proceed with greater restraint and delicacy, and to try to understand the Shah’s position. That unsolicited advice angered Murray, who immediately replied with a letter, full of sarcasm and unveiled hostility. London put pressure on Paris, and Bourré was told “not to meddle in British affairs”. That somewhat vaguely expressed order encouraged Bourré to greater activity, and in his further dispatches he began to develop the idea of joining Franco-Russian activities in Persia and Central Asia, all of them directed against Great Britain. He also expressed satisfaction with the fact that the end of the Crimean War had terminated what he called “abnormal relationship between the French and the Russian missions in Teheran”, and did not hide his pleasure at the possibility “from now on no longer to have to prevent the Persian cabinet from heading towards an alliance with Russia”. Bourré stressed that the setting up of a French mission in Teheran during the height of the Crimean War had provoked no Russian reaction at all. As for the British, who were the allies of France, “the possibility of establishing a French Legation was traditionally considered as damaging to Great Britain’s interests in Asia”. For Thompson, Murray, Stevens and the numerous staff of the British Mission in Teheran, as well as the British consultates in Persia, wrote Bourré, “the Anglo-French alliance on the Black Sea was nothing more than an episode, while the danger that threatens them by our mere presence here, is a matter of principle”. Bourré foresaw the inevitable activation of Russian policy in Asia and considered that France should adopt a friendly attitude.

Bourré’s position was well known to the Shah and his First Minister since they were in close and constant contact with the French Minister, keeping him informed about the Anglo-Persian correspondence
on the subject of Herat and the incident that caused the break in Anglo-Persian relations. Anichkov, the Russian Minister Plenipotentiary in Teheran, was also aware of the situation, but the attitude of St. Petersburg remained cool. The Russian government could not forget the inimical, not to say treacherous, behaviour of the Shah at Russia’s most difficult moment during the Crimean War. Disregarding the neutrality treaty between Persia and Russia (29 September 1854), the Shah was straining to achieve an anti-Russian military alliance with Great Britain and France,\textsuperscript{16} and to obtain their agreement to his annexation of the Trans-Caucasus. Those feelings had dictated and strengthened Russia’s attitude from the very beginning of the conflict between London and Teheran. Anichkov was instructed “to avoid any kind of visible interference in an affair which in reality does not concern us”.\textsuperscript{17} That was not quite the case, and Bourré was conveying somewhat different information. In the reply he received from the Shah’s First Minister, Mirza Agha Khan Nuri on 16 December 1855, to a question about the causes of the campaign being prepared against Herat, Nuri hinted—possibly with a provocative purpose—at the co-ordination of those preparations with Russia, and spoke of “the friendship that unites Russia and Persia”.\textsuperscript{18}

We have no proof that such co-ordination existed, yet there is hardly any doubt of Russia’s mission having been informed, or at least having knowledge, of the Shah’s intentions. There is, therefore, no reason to assume that she had tried to dissuade him from the recurring Herat adventure. The events that followed forced St. Petersburg to discontinue its demonstrative indifference and to take a more active part in what was going on in Persia, due to the fact that during the Anglo-Persian negotiations which had begun in Paris, the Russian position in Persia was threatened.

On 11 July 1856 Lord Clarendon addressed an ultimatum to the Persian government, including demands which, if complied with immediately, would either have put an end to the conflict or would have deepened it. Among others there were two demands that caused great alarm in St. Petersburg: (1) The British government insisted on its inclusive and unlimited right to act as go-between in case of controversies or conflicts between Persia and the Afghan principalities and (2) Britain also insisted on being given the right to open an unlimited number of consulates anywhere it deemed necessary on Persian territory. Commenting on those demands, Gorchakov had written about the first that Great Britain had this time fully demonstrated her wish to “bring Persia down to the level of states dependent on the East India Company”. Speaking on the second demand, he pointed out that “the granting to Great Britain the right to have her official agents in Persian ports on the Caspian Sea, where they would act
against our political aims and trade purposes is absolutely inadmissible.” However, Gorchakov considered the British demand to evacuate Persian forces from Herat and “to restore the relations that existed between Persia and Herat before the war” as reasonable and just, and instructed Anichkov to advise the Shah to accept them. However, the Shah countered the British demands with some of his own, which were utterly unacceptable to Great Britain, since they concerned internal problems of Afghanistan and, primarily, dealt with the question of the reunification of Afghanistan under the leadership of Kabul.

Gorchakov was anxious to prevent a war between Persia and Great Britain at any cost because the inevitable defeat of Persia would seriously complicate Russia’s position in the Middle East and Central Asia. He knew that it was unable to come to Persia’s aid since, in the aftermath of the Crimean War, his country had to deal with an internal political crisis. Gorchakov therefore refused the Shah’s request for help in a very decisive manner. Beginning in the summer of 1856, St. Petersburg increased its diplomatic efforts to prevent an armed conflict. On 27 August 1856 Gorchakov wrote to the Russian ambassador in London, Baron Brunnov:

Russia considers, that unity of action such as existed in Persia between Russia and Great Britain during the last fifteen years of Emperor Nikolai I’s reign, should be restored... It was due to that unity of action and opinions, that it was possible to keep peace in Persia... If Great Britain wishes to change that system and act against Persia and Russia with violence and senseless vengeance, she is assuming responsibility for committing a major political blunder. Russia cannot remain indifferent to events that are taking place in the immediate vicinity of her borders.

Gorchakov had also written to Brunnov’s successor, Count Khreptovich: “Russia cannot support all the accusations, which the British government makes against Persia”. The behaviour of the Anglo-Indian authorities annoyed Gorchakov. He considered that the appearance of British men-of-war in the Persian Gulf in the summer of 1856 was not dictated by the prevailing situation, and was an exaggerated reaction. Great Britain, in his opinion, made haste to use the first possible pretext for “putting their hands on the Persian Gulf islands, which she, will of course never return, and thus striking a blow to Persia”. He was also annoyed by Teheran’s intransigence. He complained about the Persian envoy in St. Petersburg, who, in his talks with him, “had not mentioned the fact that the siege of Herat had been lifted”, and who avoided giving direct answers to questions on that subject. Desiring to exercise a restraining influence on Great Britain, Gorchakov instructed the Russian ambassador in Paris, Count Kisselev, to have a meeting with
Lord Cowley, the head of the British delegation in the Paris Anglo-Persian negotiations. Kisselev was to inform him that, in Gorchakov's opinion, Teheran's intransigence was due to the fact that the Shah had not yet received the former's "advice and warnings". In that connection Kisselev was to try to restrain "as far as possible, the British cabinet from an unavoidable declaration of war on Persia". Kisselev was also to make it clear to Lord Cowley that "we have reason to believe, that the Persian Court will listen to our persuasion and will follow our advice". Gorchakov's instructions to Kisselev concluded by saying that the Russian government was also counting on French cooperation in the prevention of an Anglo-Persian war.

The war could, nevertheless, not be avoided, and Russian government circles were immediately faced with new problems that reflected the worries and apprehensions of a nation that had so recently suffered defeat. Their main problem was how to prevent the conflict in the vicinity of Russia's borders from spreading and involving Russia directly. In January 1857 a meeting of the Special Committee took place to discuss the possible consequences of an Anglo-Persian war. Emperor Alexander II and the heir to the throne, Grand Duke Nikolai Alexandrovich, the Emperor's brothers, Grand Dukes Constantine, Nikolai and Mikhail, as well as the highest dignitaries of the Russian Empire participated in that meeting. The committee included a group (headed by the Viceroy of the Caucasus, Prince A. I. Baryatinsky) which took a strong anti-British attitude, demanding Russia's active intervention in the brewing conflict, and siding with Persia to strike a blow against British India. The majority of participants of the meeting, with Gorchakov in the lead, rejected that plan. Baryatinsky, however, insisted on a more active Middle Eastern policy, pointing out that Great Britain would not be content with defeating and crushing Persia but would start another war against Russia in the Middle Eastern theatre of war in order to destroy Russia completely. Great Britain, said Baryatinsky, would strike "from the south from the shores of the Persian Gulf, and from the east via Afghanistan". Under Baryatinsky's influence Emperor Alexander II instructed General N. O. Sukhozanets, his Minister of War, to prepare a report "On the possibility of an inimical clash with Great Britain in Central Asia". Baryatinsky despatched a lengthy letter to the Minister of War, in which he painted a depressing picture of the "inevitable" development of events. In the event of a Persian defeat, wrote Baryatinsky, Great Britain would become strongly entrenched on the shores of the Caspian Sea, where she would begin by setting up consulates and end with "having her own fleet". He added: "The appearance of a British fleet in the Caspian Sea will be a mortal blow, not only to our trade, but also to the political independence of the
Empire". Without waiting for government decisions, Baryatinsky took immediate steps to reinforce the Russian garrisons of the borders with Persia, and to repair and fortify military constructions along those borders. Political decisions at the highest level soon followed, planning “to forget altogether” the none too friendly attitude Persia had adopted towards Russia in the Crimean War. On 12 January 1857 Gorchakov instructed Lagovsky, the new Russian minister in Teheran, to inform the Shah and Mirza Agha Khan Nuri that the Russian ambassadors in London, Paris and Constantinople had received orders to support Persia in her struggle against Great Britain. Gorchakov also informed him that the Russian government, wishing to alleviate Persia’s financial situation, had decided to forego the remainder of the war debt still owed by Persia under Turkmanchai Treaty of 1828.

Russia’s pro-Persian position was a cause for great rejoicing and pro-Russian feelings at the Shah’s court, and a new rapprochement between Russia and Persia was foreseen. In the first months of 1857 the despatch of a number of Russian officer-instructors to Persia was seriously considered. Russia felt that a Russian–Persian rapprochement would have a positive influence on Kabul as well and Lagovsky was certain that the appearance of Russian officers in Teheran would “also make an impression in Afghanistan, whose rulers were still undecided between their fear of the British and their desire to be freed from their influence”. Lagovsky also considered that, due to Anglo-Persian development, the moment was propitious for “tying Persia to our policies”.

With the beginning of an active war, Russian diplomatic pressure on Great Britain increased. During December 1856–February 1857 there were frequent contacts between Russian and British diplomats in St. Petersburg, London and Paris. Count Kisselev received instructions to spare no effort to persuade France to act jointly with Russia. St. Petersburg was particularly concerned about Great Britain’s intention of opening consulates in Northern Persia and that is clearly seen from the correspondence during those months. Count Khreptovich insistently tried to persuade Lord Clarendon to give up this aim “inasmuch as Great Britain has no important trade there”. Khreptovich did not conceal that his government considered that “under the conditions prevailing in Persia consuls are actually agents, and Russia therefore does not desire their presence in areas close to those which she has earmarked for herself”.

On 26 February 1857 Gorchakov despatched a letter to Lagovsky, outlining St. Petersburg’s position on the matter of the consulates and requesting him to take most energetic measures to prevent the inclu-
sion of the question in the Anglo-Persian peace treaty. In that letter he wrote:

It is impossible to expound in an official letter all those situations that may arise when the question of establishing British consulates on Persian territory is discussed. I have therefore decided to enumerate all those possibilities that we may guess or foresee in a private letter to you. Should the British insist on appointing their consuls in Shiraz and in Meshhed, you should keep in mind that it is of great importance to us to keep them away from Meshhed, while Shiraz is actually of lesser importance. It remains however a matter of extreme urgency to keep British consuls away from the shores of the Caspian Sea. We attach no particular importance to the form of that indispensable condition, be it a convention between Persia, Great Britain and ourselves or an additional paragraph in the treaty signed between Farough Khan and Cowley. What really matters is — that under no circumstances should there be any British consuls on the shores of the Caspian Sea, and it is up to you to invest the greatest efforts for that purpose and to be able to claim the honour of having organized it. We are not concerned with the number of consuls the British may have on the shores of the Persian Gulf, but Meshhed would be a point of great importance to us. Should we be prepared to sacrifice that, it would only be in order to prevent the British from having a consul there. There is yet another consideration: should the British insist on having their consuls inside Persia, in Shiraz or Muhammara, it might then be possible for us to make it conditional on our obtaining Meshed for ourselves in exchange.29

Lagovsky began to take immediate steps and an urgent dispatch was sent to Paris, where the negotiations were under way, addressed to the head of the Persian delegation, Farough Khan, and signed by Mirza Khan Nuri. The latter wrote that the problem of consulates was threatening to worsen the relations with Russia and that Persia was therefore anxious to avoid that, suggesting the following way of solving that problem. Great Britain would be given the same rights in the matter of consulates as were earlier given to Russia. Great Britain however must behave with responsibility and restraint just like Russia, who until then had shown restraint in that matter; although she had acquired the right to set up consulates wherever she wished in Persia, Russia had limited herself to the three existing consulates. “We have no wish to refuse Great Britain the status of most favoured nation but we expect of her the same circumspection and moderation in her behaviour as is shown by Russia”.30

However, Russia's diplomatic endeavours were not successful. On 4 March 1857 the Anglo-Persian treaty was signed and included a paragraph which, due to Great Britain's insistence, gave her the right to set up consulates wherever she chose in Persia. Gorchakov reported with bitterness to his Emperor that the Paris treaty made Great Britain “the most privileged nation in the East”.31 He nevertheless considered that not all was lost. The treaty, according to him, had been signed far too hastily and contained points which could
have been more favourable to Persia, had the Persian diplomats acted in closer contact with Russia. Gorchakov was convinced that in the process of ratification of the treaty, it would still be possible to effect some changes.

The British ambassador in St Petersburg, Lord Woodhouse, was summoned to Gorchakov who informed him that if Great Britain did not give up her intention of opening consulates in the northern provinces of Persia “the Imperial Government will make the utmost use of its influence to advise Teheran not to ratify the treaty that was signed in Paris”. London did not submit to pressure, and the Paris treaty was ratified without changes.

Russia, weakened by the Crimean War, could not give more energetic support to Persia in her conflict with Great Britain. Nevertheless the support given by Russia had enabled Persia to obtain fairly moderate peace conditions: she managed to avoid signing a new trade agreement with Great Britain and did not have to pay compensation to the population of Herat; both conditions were included in the first British variant of the treaty. Gorchakov wrote that “the Anglo-Persian treaty has the following indisputable advantage for us; Persia has preserved her independence, the destruction of which would have strengthened Great Britain and would have been extremely dangerous for our Asian possessions”.

NOTES

1. Arkhiv vneshnei politiki Rossii (AVPR), fond(f.) Otchety (1856), list(l.) 255.
2. See M. K. Rojkova, Ekonomicheskie sviazii Rossii so Srednei Aziei v 40-60-kh godakh XIX века (Moscow, 1963), N. A. Khalfin, Politika Rossii v Srednei Azii (Moscow, 1965).
4. PRO, FO 60/205, Murray to Clarendon (19 October 1855).
6. AVPR, f.Kantseliaria MID. Perepiska s Tegeranom, 1856, delo (D.) 222, 1.1018.
7. Ibid., f. Otchety (1856), 1.256.
11. Ibid., pp. 280, 281-82.
13. Ibid., pp. 216-17.
14. Ibid.