

Book Review

Jennifer Siegel, *Endgame: Britain, Russia and the Final Struggle for Central Asia* (London: IB Tauris Publishers, 2002), pp. 273+XVIII; hard bound; good paper; well printed; end notes; index; price, not mentioned (Vanguard Books' price Rs: 1495.00).

The Central Asia had been a significant geo-political and strategic factor in the world power politics right from the antiquity. During the medieval period the area played a very important role in history of Asia in general and that of the South-Asian Subcontinent in particular. The Central Asian Mughals ruled over the subcontinent for more than three hundred years and thus left a deep imprint over the region. During Russian as well as Soviet (the then USSR) periods Central Asia remained a most important strategic location for which the then super powers remained in altercation with each other. In the post-Soviet time when the Central Asian States got independence, the world as well as the regional powers are trying their best to extend influence over the Central Asian Regions. Besides, its strategic significance, the Central Asia got attraction for its resources especially the natural resources including oil and gas. Consequently a lot of research is going on since the independence of the Central Asian countries. The book under review seems to be an effort in that direction.

Jennifer Siegel, the author of the book, is a qualified teacher as well as researcher. She did her Ph.D. History, from the Yale University, USA, in 1998. She got John M. Olin Postdoctoral Fellowship of the Yale University during 1998-99. Presently, she is working as an Assistant Professor of History, at the Ohio State University, USA. She has specialized in modern European diplomatic and military history of nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with special focus on British and Russian empires. She teaches classes on international relations, comparative empires,

modern intelligence history, the origin of war and the history of oil.

Jennifer Siegel has authored a similar book titled: *Peaceful Penetration under Arms: Anglo-Russian Relations in Central Asia* (published in 1998). She has Co-edited with Peter J. Jackson, a book titled: *Intelligence and Statecraft: the Use and limits of Intelligence in International Society* (published in 2005). She is currently working on “an examination of British and French bank loan to Russia in the late Imperial period, up to the Genoa Conference of 1922”. Siegel is also co-authoring A Survey of Great and Super Power Relations with Iran in the 19th and 20th Centuries. She undertook research on the project, under review, while she was teaching at Yale University, USA but at the time of the publication of the book she was teaching history at the University of Pennsylvania, USA.

In 2003 her book titled “*Endgame: Britain, Russia and the Final Struggle for Central Asia*” was awarded American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies’ Barbara Jelavich Prize. The book deals with the famous Anglo- Russian struggle from dominance over Central Asia during the first and second decades of the twentieth century, more practically from 1907 to 1914. This rivalry of the two great powers is known as the Great Game and its play grounds were the Central Asia and the Caucasus — Afghanistan, Tibet, Azerbaijan and especially Persia. Anglo-Russian Imperial rivalry was the main cause of the game.

The book contains eight chapters along with Forewords, Acknowledgements, and Note on Text, Introduction, Note, Bibliography, maps, and the Index. Chapter-I deals with the Anglo-Russian imperial rivalry i.e., the Great Game and the agreement of 1907. Chapter-II deals with the nature of Anglo-Russian relationships during 1907-8. Chapter-III tells us about the 1909 plans and actions under the caption: ‘old designs under a new Cover’, Chapter-IV explains the discord of 1910. Chapter-V is regarding the Anglo-Russian foreign policy shifts. Chapter-VI tells us about the details of the Accord of 1912. Chapter-VII deals with the revised Anglo-Russian Agreement of 1913. Chapter-VIII focuses on the Anglo-Russian Agreement of 1914.

Almost through out the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Russian king continued struggle to attain supremacy over Persia, Central Asia and the South Asian subcontinent, however, almost all the eighteenth century efforts failed to attain optimum successes. On the other hand, the early nineteenth century witnessed “tremendous expansion” of Russian influences and expansions over Asia. The Anglo-Russian Convention was signed at St. Petersburg on 31 August 1907. The conditions of the treaty show that both the super powers had to accept major compromises. Three separate agreements were signed regarding Persia, Afghanistan and Tibet.

The treaty concerning Persia divided the country between British and Russian spheres of influence with a no-man’s land in between. On Afghanistan Britain promised not to change the political status of Afghanistan and on the other hand Russia accepted Afghanistan beyond its sphere of influence. Both got equal trading facilities. Both the super powers accepted China’s suzerain rights. The author concludes that, “...as the 1908 drew to a close, the relative success of the Anglo-Russian accord remained nebulous. Both powers were openly committed to the continuation of the relationship in Central Asia and vociferously advertised any achievements that might possibly be attributed to the agreement. Nevertheless, the immediate actual benefits gained from the 1907 convention fell far short of either governments’ hopes or expectations.’ (p.49)

Chapter three discusses the change of international situation in 1909 following the Austro-Hungarian annexation of Russian and Herzegovina. Britain and France both were unwilling to assure Russia of military support if the annexation escalate into armed conflict in the Balkans. The author is finally of the view that, “it was clear that the ongoing difficulties in Persia, coupled with the stubborn refusal of Afghan Emir to heed the wishes of his Great Power neighbours and normalize relations on both his southern and northern frontiers, were posing challenges to the rapprochement that, if not resolved, could force Britain and Russia to re evaluate their commitment to the agreement.” (p.75)

In Chapter IV Siegel has discussed the change international scenario due to unrest in Tibet, refugee problem at the Russo-

Afghan frontier and continuous chaos in Persia. In such situation the Anglo-Russian relationship came under local, regional and international levels. According to Siegel there were “structural flaws” in the Anglo-Russian Agreement of 1907 and those became visible during 1911. The influence of the Hazarah refugees in a large number in Russian territory during the reign of Afghan King Habibullah Khan caused a serious threat to the agreement and relations between the two superpowers. The situation was dealt by Russia that has been evaluated in the fifth chapter.

“Persian’s capitulation to the Russian ultimatum had narrowly averted a potential collapse of the Anglo-Russian accord in Persia.” The fall out of the situation dominated the political actions and the reaction of the year 1912. The situation has been discussed in details in Chapter VI. The chapter has discussed in detail the fallout of the negotiations between the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Dmitrievich, and Sir Edward Grey, the Foreign Secretary of Britain at Balmoral in 1912.

Seigel has drawn the conclusion that the presumptions made in the nineteenth century to the effect that the Great Powers’ struggle for Central Asia might lead to a world war, did not materialize. In that respect, according to the author, the 1907 Anglo-Russian Agreement can be termed as a “success”. However the rapprochement did not prove to be a permanent solution of the Anglo-British tussle over Central Asia but nevertheless was “a temporary bridge over the gaping divide that separated British and Russian aims and desires in Central Asia”. With regard to Afghanistan, Persia and Tibet the treaty was not as fruitful as was for the tussle over the Central Asia.

The book is undoubtedly a very significant one to understand not only the super power politics and strategies to retain and expand their hegemony especially over Europe and Asia but also the situation prior to the beginning of the First World War. The author has mainly focused on the Treaty of 1907 between the then Super Powers of the world namely Great Britain and Russia. She has pen-pictured the situation of the world politic that led to the signing of the treaty. She has, however, put major emphasis on the fallout of the treaty. Hence, the book is important one to understand the treaty in particular and its aftereffects in general.

Similarly, the author has highlighted the entire scenario of the world politics as well as power retention and expansion game of the then world power-game players.

It can be safely concluded that the author of the book Jennifer Siegel is a qualified and seasoned historian with necessary understanding of both the concerned languages of the field i.e., English and Russian. Consequently, she has brought out a new picture of the superpower rivalry during seventeenth, eighteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. Her abilities to comprehend Russian language and extricate primary sources, have given her exceptional eminence among the historians of the area under discussion.

The title of the book (*Endgame*) does not seem to be most accurate as the powers retaining and acquiring game of both the super powers did not end with the signing of the treaty. The factual position is that the power-game not only sustained during the twentieth century, but is also alive in this twenty-first century. Another flaw in the title is with regard to Central Asia which has been taken at the core of the tussle between the then two super powers. But practically the author has focused too much on the strategic importance of Central Asia and too less on the people, culture, economy and internal politics of the region. Hence, a better title of the book would have been “Anglo-Russian Agreement of 1907 and its Consequences” or “The Aftereffects of the Anglo-Russian Agreement of 1907”.

As the allusion to the sources suggest, Jennifer Siegel has extensively utilized the official documents available in Russia and Britain. Hence, the book possesses a unique position in the available research based accounts with special reference to the Anglo-Russian relations during the eighteenth century in general and the early period of the twentieth century in particular. At some places she has given multiple references to ascertain the genuineness of her contention and analyses. At the same time it establishes the genuine concern of the researcher in the realm of exactness of the account.

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