### **Gale Primary Sources**

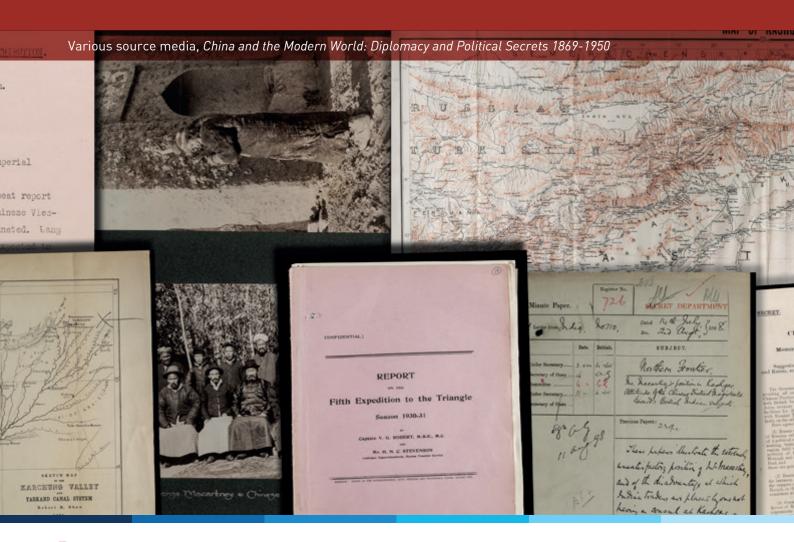
Start at the source.

# British India and the Chinese Borderlands, 1869-1950

The Political and Secret Records of the Government of India, India Office Library, British Library, London

Dr. Alexander Morrison

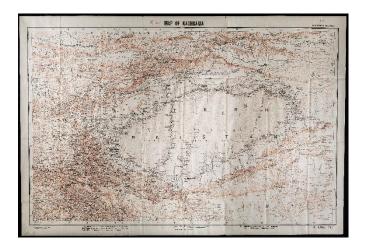
Fellow & Tutor in History, New College, Oxford





## British India and the Chinese Borderlands, 1869-1950

The Political and Secret Records of the Government of India, India Office Library, British Library, London.



'Military report on Kashgaria Simla: Intelligence Branch, Division of Chief of Staff, 1907', IOR/L/PS/20/A108

The tentacles of Britain's Indian Empire stretched far beyond its nominal frontiers, which in any case expanded throughout the nineteenth century. From the Durand Line in the far North-West, which provided a contested border with Afghanistan, to Hunza, Chitral and the far reaches of the Karakoram range, Ladakh and the Tibetan plateau, the Naga Hills and the Shan and Kachin States of Upper Burma, the formal territory of British India was surrounded by an informal penumbra, where British trade, diplomatic and military influence still penetrated. Much of this lay in the outlying regions of the Qing Empire: Tibet, which was effectively independent and under British protection after 1913, with a British agent at Gyantse from 1904; Yunnan, which bordered British Burma, French Indochina and the buffer-state of Siam between them;" and perhaps most fascinating of all, Xinjiang, reconquered by the Qing only in 1877 after a widespread revolt by the region's Chinese and Turkic Muslim population, and thirteen years of independence under the rule of the Khoqandi adventurer Yaqub Beg (18201877). By the 1930s it would once again effectively be independent, under the rule of the warlord Sheng Shicai (1897-1970).

This was part of the territory of the so-called 'Great Game' between the British and Russian Empires, where these two great powers manoeuvred for influence in the lightlygoverned Chinese borderlands. For many historians this contest has become almost synonymous with the entire history of Central Asia in this period, but it is misleading to suggest that it was only the decisions and actions of British and Russian elites that mattered. iv The 'Great Game' narrative marginalises the role of Central Asia's own rulers and peoples, as well as that of the Qing state, which showed a resilience that took the European powers by surprise when it succeeded in reconquering China's Central Asian territories and obliged the Russians to return the Ili valley, which they had annexed in 1871. Yaqub Beg himself had been a wily and effective ruler, receiving numerous British and Russian missions at his capital of Kashgar and playing them off against each other. The first of these in 1868 was led by the tea-planter Robert Barkley Shaw (1839-1879), whose account of his reception, and his reports on the state of affairs in Eastern Turkestan were the first detailed information on the region to reach the Government of India. vii He would later accompany an official mission to the region led by Sir Thomas Forsyth in 1870, and became the British resident at Mandalay in 1878, dying there a year later. viii His final report on Yaqub Beg's rule, preserved in the Political & Secret Records of the India Office, is a remarkably balanced, sympathetic account of the Central Asian ruler and his state. \* It was only after his death that his research into the hagiographies of the Khwajas (religious elites) who had ruled Eastern Turkestan in the 17th and 18th centuries was published.\*

After Yaqub Beg's death and the return of Qing rule, the remote Central Asian city of Kashgar became the site of competing British and Russian consular outposts. The



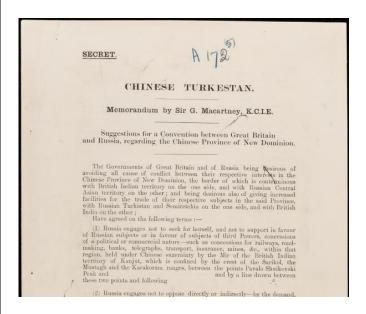


best-known protagonist on the British side was Sir George Macartney (1867-1945), the son of a Scottish diplomat and a Chinese noblewoman, born and brought up first in Nanking, and then educated at Dulwich College in London.xi Arriving in Kashgar in 1890 as part of an expedition led by Francis Younghusband (1863-1942), Macartney was fluent in Chinese, and soon added a good knowledge of Turki. Despite these obvious qualifications, as a mixed-race man from a middle-class background he struggled for recognition within the notoriously snobbish diplomatic service. Though he served in Kashgar from 1890–1918, he was only officially appointed as consul in 1908, something that was a considerable handicap to him in his dealings both with the Chinese and with his Russian counterpart.xii The latter was the irascible Nikolai Fedorovich Petrovskii (1837-1908), who claimed to have great influence over the Qing authorities in Kashgar despite never learning a word of Chinese.xim A string of travellers passing through the city were entertained by one or the other of this pair, and many travelogues and memoirs evoke the atmosphere of consular Kashgar in those days, notably that of Macartney's wife.\*\*



Photographs taken by Lt-Col Sir Percy Sykes to illustrate Chinese Turkestan, the Russian Pamirs and Osh. April-November 1915. IOR/L/PS/20/A119.

Meanwhile however, Macartney was doing his job, in which he was much more concerned with his relations with the local authorities than with entertaining passing travellers. The record of these day-to-day interactions and communications is found in his correspondence with the British resident in Kashmir (his nominal superior) and with the Foreign Department of the Government of India, held in the Political & Secret files of the India Office. In December 1896, for instance, we find Macartney passing on the objections of the Chinese provincial governor to a map of Kashmir which placed the Agsai Chin plateau in British territory, having had his attention drawn to this by Petrovskii.\*\* Seventy years later the Chinese construction of a road linking Xinjiang and Tibet through this remote, barren, region would become a casus belli of the 1962 Sino-Indian War.\*\*i



'Chinese Turkestan. Memorandum by Sir George Macartney, K.C.I.E, suggestions for a convention between Britain and Russia, regarding the Chinese province of New Dominion [Xinjiang]' 23/08/1915. IOR/L/PS/18/A172

More often throughout the 1890s Macartney was encouraging the Chinese to resist Russian encroachments in the terrain which the latter claimed on the high Pamirs as a result of their annexation of the Khanate of Khoqand in 1876.\*\* In December 1891 Macartney wrote to Sir Henry Durand in Kashmir that the



Russian authorities had informed the Chinese that the large body of their troops who had occupied the Pamir plateau the previous summer had no official status.\*\*\*\* With the same letter he forwarded his translation of the inscription on a pillar which had recently been discovered at Somatash in the Pamirs - it commemorated a victory by a Qing general over the ruling Khwajas sixty years before, and could potentially have been used to bolster the Chinese claim to the region.\*\* Ultimately the Russians did annex much of the Pamir region, pushing aside both Chinese and Afghan claims, and in 1895 a new frontier line was amicably agreed with the British, leaving a sliver of Afghan territory - the Wakhan Corridor - between British India and Russian Turkestan.\*\* In 1907 an Anglo-Russian agreement was signed to resolve continued disputes between the two powers in Asia, which did help to ensure that in 1914 Britain entered the Great War against the Central Powers as part of the Entente with Russia. Nevertheless, tensions remained,\*\*\* and in 1915 Macartney was still proposing a comprehensive agreement to settle continued disagreements over respective British and Russian interests in Xinjiang.xxii Yet his proposal was rapidly overtaken by events when Russian power in Central Asia dissolved in the wake first of the 1916 revolt against Russian rule (which saw a wave of Kyrgyz refugees flooding into Xinjiang), and then the few things the discreet Macartney published in his own lifetime was an account of his journey home through Central Asia during the turmoil of the Russian Civil War.xiv It was only after 1921 that the Soviets reconquered Turkestan, and only in 1924 that the new regime reasserted control over the former imperial Russian consulate in Kashgar.\*\* By then Macartney had gone into a well-earned retirement in Jersey, where he died in 1945 just after the island was liberated from German occupation, and only four years before the Kashgar consulate would close for good as the Chinese Communists moved in after 1949.\*\*\*

Unlike Macartney, most of the players of the so-called 'Great Game' on British India's Chinese and Central Asian Frontiers were army officers, whose talents for moustache-growing, shooting game and self-publicity vastly exceeded their knowledge of local languages and cultures. xxxiii An exception, who shared with Macartney the qualities of linguistic virtuosity and self-effacement, was the explorer and spy Ney Elias (1844-1897), whose Jewishness meant that he too was to some extent an outsider in British India's military and diplomatic establishment. Having begun his career with a commercial firm in Shanghai in 1866, Elias undertook arduous expeditions first through the Gansu corridor, and then across the Gobi Desert to Russia. In 1874 he served as assistant to the resident at Mandalay in what was then still the independent kingdom of Upper Burma, from where he set out on a mission to survey trade routes from Burma to China. This failed after the interpreter, Augustus Margary, was murdered at Teng Yueh in south-western Yunnan, but Elias himself managed to complete a survey of the Shweli river above Bhamo, which now forms part of the frontier between Myanmar and China. \*\*\*\*\*\* He then became commissioner in Ladakh, on the Tibetan frontiers of Kashmir, from where he sent a stream of reports on the trade and politics of the area.xxix Having been an eyewitness to the reconquest of Yagub Beg's kingdom by Qing forces,\*\*\* in 1885 he embarked on an arduous journey through the Pamirs to the Upper Oxus, supplying the Government of India with its first maps and detailed descriptions of the region. Elias never published accounts of any of these journeys: instead his best-known work was a scholarly edition of



Mirza Haidar Dughlat's 16th-century *Ta'rikh-i Rashidi*, which is still widely used today. \*\*\*\* His entry in the 1901 *Dictionary of National Biography* noted that his writings 'are for the most part only accessible in the secret archives of the Indian government'. \*\*\* It is precisely those secret archives which are now made available in this collection, and many of Elias's most important reports are now included amongst them.

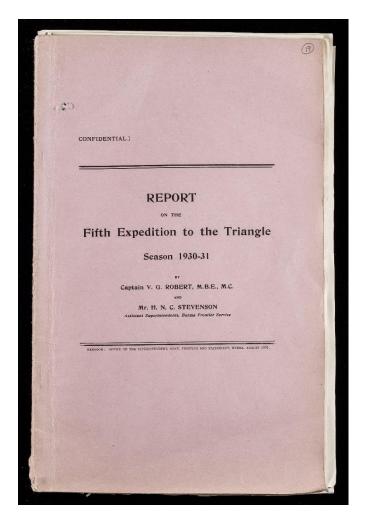
As the trajectory of Elias's career suggests, in the official mind of the Government of India the frontiers with China in Xinjiang, Tibet and Yunnan were intimately linked. The first two of these fell within the princely state of Kashmir, whose Maharajah had considerable autonomy in internal affairs, but whose foreign relations were controlled by the British. Ladakh was its remotest region, a high plateau where the local population were predominantly Buddhist.xxxiii As the dispute over Aqsai Chin suggests, there was no clear demarcation of the frontier, and commercial and other ties with Kashgaria on the one hand and Tibet on the other were in many ways at least as strong as those with India and the Vale of Kashmir. This resulted in a steady flow of trade through the regional capital of Leh: the reports compiled by local commissioners between 1875 and 1898 show that the value of this trade quadrupled from 11 to just over 42 lakhs of rupees, while its composition included gold, silk, cotton cloth, pashm (fine goat wool for shawls), charras (marijuana), opium, green tea and horses.\*\*\* Systematic study and quantitative analysis of these should yield important insights not just into the economy of Ladakh itself, but of these neighbouring regions of the Qing Empire.

This was also true of Yunnan, with which the British relationship intensified after the conquest and annexation of upper Burma in 1886.\*\*\* While much of the

border was demarcated under an agreement in 1894, this produced a long-standing dispute with China, which continued to claim the so-called 'Irrawaddy triangle' in Kachin territory between the two main branches of the river north of Myitkyina.xxxvi British trading and commercial interests in Burma were far greater than in the remote reaches of Xinjiang, Ladakh and Kashmir, partly because a denser population provided a larger market, and also because of Burma's wealth of natural resources - oil, teak, and commercial rice cultivation in the coastal regions.\*\*\* Tapping the even larger Chinese markets and natural resources of Yunnan was a longstanding British aim, but the Yunnan frontier ran through the Kachin and Shan States far from the nearest railheads at Myitkyina (1898) and Lashio (1903) and, as in Kashmir, the mountainous landscape and poor roads were a substantial obstacle. Accordingly, much of the correspondence regarding the Burma-Yunnan frontier is focused on trade and on improving communications. In 1916, when the Chinese authorities proposed to open a new customs post to tax the trade passing through Kuyung, north of Myitkyina, the British authorities conducted a detailed survey of all three of the major trans-border trade routes in the region, concluding that only that through Kuyung to Teng Yueh was of any significance, and providing a detailed description of the route itself and of the value and composition of the major commodities that passed along it - principally kerosene and cotton yarn from Burma, and foodstuffs from Yunnan.xxxiii From 1937 the route from the other frontier railhead at Lashio to Kunming - the famous Burma Road - would be used to supply war material to the Chinese Nationalist Guomindang in their war against Japan. By 1938-9, as war loomed over the British empire in both Europe and Asia, the government in Rangoon was negotiating with an aviation firm called 'Eurasia' based



in the Nationalist capital, Chungking, which wanted to open an air service from Kunming to Rangoon and on to Singapore – something which aroused considerable misgivings when it was revealed that much of the firm's capital and all of its pilots and equipment were German. Permission was given nevertheless, on the condition that Imperial Airways was permitted to open its own service on the same route – one consideration being that in the event of hostilities with Japan, it might be the only safe air route to Hong Kong.



Captain V. G. Robert & Mr H. N. Stevenson, 'Report on the Fifth Expedition to the Triangle. Season 1930-1', IOR/L/PS/12/2231

Within four years British rule in Burma came to an ignominious end, as Japanese forces rapidly captured Rangoon and drove northwards, with British and Indian troops and refugees fleeing in hellish conditions through

the jungle-clad mountains to Kohima, Imphal and Dimapur in the far North-East of British India.\* While Burma would be reconquered temporarily in 1944-45, the prestige of the British empire in Asia had been shattered for good. British India was partitioned and granted independence as India and Pakistan in 1947, followed by independence in Burma in 1948, the defeat of the Nationalist Guomindang and the establishment of a Communist regime in China in 1949, and the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950-51. With this, the consulates and trading posts the Government of British India had maintained across their long frontier - at Kashgar, Gyantse, Teng Yueh and other points - ceased to function. The flow of information they had collected and channelled towards Calcutta, Delhi and London since the 1870s came to an end as Communist China sealed its borders and became a closed country.

#### Citation

Alexander Morrison, 'British India and the Chinese Borderlands, 1869-1950', China and the Modern World: Diplomacy and Political Secrets 1869-1950, Cengage Learning (EMEA) Ltd, 2019



**ENDNOTES** 

- Alex McKay, Tibet and the British Raj. The Frontier Cadre 1904-1947 (Richmond: Curzon, 1997)
- "On Anglo-French Rivalry in this region see Patrick Tuck, The French Wolf and the Siamese Lamb: The French Threat to Siamese Independence, 1858-1901 (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1995)
- iii See James Millward, Beyond the Pass: Economy, Ethnicity, and Empire in Qing Central Asia, 1759-1864 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998) & Hodong Kim, Holy War in China: The Muslim Rebellion and State in Chinese Central Asia, 1864–1877 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).
- <sup>iv</sup> Alexander Morrison, "'Beyond the 'Great Game': The Russian Origins of the Second Anglo–Afghan War." *Modern Asian Studies* 51/3 (2017): 686–735.
- <sup>v</sup> Immanuel C. Y Hsü, *The Ili Crisis: A Study of Sino-Russian Diplomacy* 1871–1881 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965)
- ilan W. Campbell, "Our friendly rivals': rethinking the Great Game in Ya'qub Beg's Kashgaria, 1867–77." Central Asian Survey 33/2 (2014): 199-214. The most important Russian mission was that of Colonel A. N. Kuropatkin, who published his account as Kashgariya: istoriko-geograficheskii ocherk strany, eya voennyya sily, promyshlennost' i torgovlya (St Petersburg: Balashev, 1878) translated as Kashgaria: (Eastern or Chinese Turkestan). Historical and Geographical Sketch of the Country; its Military Strength, Industries and Trade. trans. Walter E. Gowan (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1882). For contemporary biographies of Yaqub Beg see Demetrius Charles Boulger, The Life of Yakoob Beg, Athalik Ghazi and Badaulet, Ameer of Kashgar (London: W.H. Allen, 1878) & I. Veselovskii, Badaulet Yakub-Bek. Atalyk Kashgarskii (St Petersburg: Tip. Imperatorskoi Akademii Nauk, 1898).
- viiRobert Shaw, Visits to High Tartary, Yarkand, and Kashghar (London: John Murray, 1871); see Stephen Wheeler rev. Elizabeth Baigent (2004) "Shaw, Robert Barkley (1839–1879), explorer and government agent" Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.
- viii Thomas Forsyth, Report of a Mission to Yarkund in 1873 Under Command of Sir T. D. Forsyth, with Historical and Geographical Information Regarding the Possessions of the Ameer of Yarkund (Calcutta: Foreign Department Press, 1875).
- \*\* Robert Shaw, 'Memorandum on the Present Condition of Affairs in Eastern Turkistan', 11/04/1876 IOR/ L/PS/7/9-Pol.No131 pp.159a k.
- \* R. B. Shaw, "The History of the Khōjas of Eastern Turkistān," ed. N. Elias *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol.66/1, (1897), suppl. On this see further Isenbike Togan, 'Chinese Turkestan V. Under the Khojas' *Encyclopaedia Iranica* Vol. V, Fasc. 5, pp. 474-476 (http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/chinese-turkestan-v)
- xi Katherine Prior, 'Macartney, Sir George (1867–1945), diplomatist', Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (2004). See further James McCarthy, The Diplomat of Kashgar. A Very Special Agent. The Life of Sir George Macartney (Hong Kong: Proverse, 2014).
- xii The standard account of his career there is Clarmont Percival Skrine & Pamela Nightingale, *Macartney at Kashgar: new light on British, Chinese and Russian activities in Sinkiang, 1890-1918* (London: Methuen, 1973).
- xiii On the Russian presence in Kashgar at this time see Aleksandr Kolesnikov, *Russkie v Kashgarii. Missiya, Ekspeditsiya, Puteshestviya* (Bishkek: Raritet, 2006); much of Petrovskii's correspondence has been published as N. F. Petrovskii, *Turkestanskie Pis'ma* ed. V. S. Myasnikov (Moscow: Pamyatniki Istoricheskoi Mysli, 2010)
- xiv Lady Catherina Theodora Macartney, An English Lady in Chinese Turkestan (London: Ernest Benn, 1931).

- \*V 'Memorandum of Information received in December 1896 Regarding the North-West Frontier of India'. IOR/L/PS/7/90-2 pp.5-6
- xvi 'Informal Note of the Indian Government (Aksai Chin)', 18/10/1958, Notes, Memoranda and letters Exchanged and Agreements signed between The Governments of India and China 1954 –1959 (New Delhi: Ministry of External Affairs, 1959) pp.26-8. On the parallel border dispute in the Eastern Himalayas see Bérénice Guyot-Réchard, Shadow states: India, China and the Himalayas, 1910-1962 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
- xvii S. C. M. Paine, *Imperial Rivals: China, Russia, and their Disputed Frontier* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1996) pp.272-4; Scott Levi, *The Rise of Khoqand 1709–1876. Central Asia in the Global Age* (Pittsburgh, PA: Pittsburgh UP, 2017) pp.188-209.
- xviii This was untrue it was in fact an official military expedition, led by Colonel Mikhail Efremovich Ionov, which was tasked among other things with removing Chinese boundary-markers in the Pamirs, something which Petrovskii considered needlessly provocative: Petrovskii to Osten-Sacken 05/10/1891; Petrovskii to Osten-Sacken 25/10/1891, *Turkestanskie Pis'ma*, pp.220, 222. Ionov also encountered and removed Francis Younghusband, who gave a celebrated account of the incident in his memoir: Francis Younghusband, *The Heart of a Continent*, *A Narrative of Travels in Manchuria*, *Across the Gobi Desert*, *through the Himalayas*, *the Pamirs*, and *Hunza 1884–1894* (London: John Murray, 1896), pp.293-4.
- xix Macartney to Durand 05/12/1891. IOR/L/PS/7/65-Sec.No.41 p.919
- xx M. G. Gerard, Report on the Proceedings of the Pamir Boundary Commission (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Govt Printing, 1897)
- xxi See Jennifer Siegel, Endgame. Britain, Russia, and the Final Struggle for Central Asia (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002)
- xxii 'Chinese Turkestan. Memorandum by Sir George Macartney, K.C.I.E, suggestions for a convention between Britain and Russia, regarding the Chinese province of New Dominion [Xinjiang]' 23/08/1915. IOR/L/PS/18/A172 pp.1-5.
- xxiii Marco Buttino, 'Central Asia (1916–20): A Kaleidoscope of Local Revolutions and the Building of the Bolshevik Order', *The Empire and Nationalism at War*, ed. Lohr, Tolz, Semyonov & von Hagen (Bloomington, IN: Slavica, 2014), pp.109-136.
- xxiv G. Macartney, 'Bolshevism as I saw it at Tashkent in 1918', Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society, Vol.7 Nos.2-3 (June 1920) pp.42-58.
- xxv Paul Nazaroff, *Moved On! From Kashgar to Kashmir* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1935) pp.115-6.
- xxvi On the inter-war history of the British consulate at Kashgar and its eventual closure see Max Everest-Phillips, 'British consuls in Kashgar', *Asian Affairs* 22/1 (1991) pp.20-34.
- xxvii For a typically bumptious example see Ralph Cobbold, *Innermost Asia. Travel and Sport in the Pamirs* (London: William Heinemann, 1900).
- xxviii See the correspondence of H. A. Browne to H.T. Duncan, 1875, in IOR/L/PS/7/3/Pol.No.97 pp.819-833.
- xxix 'Ladakh Diary' October 1877 February 1878. IOR/L/PS/7/17-Pol.No.49 pp.899-909.
- xxx Elias to Henvey 12/09/1879. IOR/L/PS/7/23-Sec.No.228 pp.1219 1231.
- xxxi Mirza Haidar Dughlat, *Ta'rikh-i Rashidi,* trans. E. Denison Ross & ed. N. Elias as, *A History of the Moghuls of Central Asia* (London: Sampson, Marston & Low, 1895)



xxxii Elizabeth Baigent, 'Elias, Ney (1844–1897), explorer and diplomatist' Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (2004). See further Gerald Morgan, Ney Elias. Explorer and Envoy Extraordinary in High Asia (London: Allen & Unwin, 1971).

xxxiii A detailed contemporary description of Ladakh can be found in Frederick Drew, *The Jummoo and Kashmir Territories. A Geographical Account* (London: Edward Stanford, 1875), pp.238–354. On Kashmir as a princely state see Mridu Rai, *Hindu Rulers, Muslim Subjects. Islam, Rights, and the History of Kashmir* (London: Hurst & Co, 2004).

voxiv 'Ladakh Trade Report for the year 1875', IOR/L/PS/7/10-Pol.No.169 pp.15-61; 'Ladakh Turkistan Tibet Trade Statistics 1899', IOR/L/PS/7/118-2964F-no.6520 pp.1-25.

xxxx On the Anglo-Burmese Wars and British rule in Burma see Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Jonathan Saha, *Law, Disorder and the* 

Colonial State: Corruption in Burma (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

xxxvi Captain V. G. Robert & Mr H. N. Stevenson, 'Report on the Fifth Expedition to the Triangle. Season 1930-1', IOR/L/PS/12/2231 pp.19-46.

xxxvii Anthony Webster, "Business and Empire: A Reassessment of the British Conquest of Burma in 1885", *The Historical Journal* 43/4 (2000) pp.1003-1025.

xxxviii A. E. Eastes, British Consul, Teng Yueh [Tengchong] to H. D. Fletcher, Assistant in Charge of Customs 14/11/1916. IOR/L/PS/11/123-P2271/1917 pp.350-357.

xxxix Foreign Office to Mr Howe (Shanghai) 16/02/1938; Sir A. Clark Kerr (Shanghai) to the Foreign Office 21/06/1938. IOR/L/PS/12/2022 pp.35, 70-72.

xl Chris Bayly & Tim Harper, Forgotten Armies. The Fall of British Asia 1941-1945 (London: Allen Lane, 2004) pp.156-207.





## **CITATION**

Morrison, Alexander: "British India and the Chinese Borderlands, 1869-1950." *China and the Modern World: Diplomacy and Political Secrets 1869-1950*, Cengage Learning (EMEA) Ltd, 2019.

© Cengage Learning 2019







