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Not far from Tora Bora

How an enemy alien oversaw Partition of India in an area that has been the theatre of the Great Game since centuries, albeit with changing actors

In memory of Peter Leighton-Langer, Amersham-Bensheim Society, Bensheim, February 26, 2008 (DRAFT– 25 Feb 2008)

Dear friends,

we have come together this evening to honour and remember Peter Leighton-Langer, a person who greatly impressed me right from the time I first met him. Klaus Kübler, who unfortunately also left us not long ago, had invited me to Bensheim to a meeting of the English-German Debating Club, where he was to talk on the Kashmir Dispute. The proceedings were chaired by an Englishman, who obviously had considerable knowledge of the region and who had spent there some time. Once the meeting was formally declared over we could switch back to German and to my surprise the Englishman spoke German with a beautiful Vienna accent. It turned out that he hailed from Austria, spent a happy youth as a good Catholic until being told after the “Anschluss” that he was of Jewish origin and had, thus, to leave the gymnasium. His parents managed to get him out of the country and to England where he worked as a farm hand and volunteered for the British Army to fight the Nazis on the day he turned eighteen. He was enrolled as an “enemy alien”, as an Austrian national and was sent not to the Continent but to India, where he stayed until this “Jewel of the Crown” was “released” into Independence. What emerged were two independent dominions of the British Commonwealth, as India was divided into two states on the lines of religion. As both religions, Hinduism and Islam, had their believers all over the subcontinent, partition resulted in states with substantial minorities, i.e. of Muslims in Hindu majority India and Hindus in Muslim majority Pakistan. At the same time that Europe saw large scale forced migration on ethnic and nationality grounds, South Asia saw forced migration on a similar scale on the grounds of religion. Today we would call it “religious cleansing”. Millions were driven out of places where their families had lived for generations, often centuries; hundreds of thousands were butchered or succumbed to the hardships of their exodus. Partition, however, remained unfinished, as some of the hundreds of the semi-independent princely states tried to remain independent. In Kashmir a Hindu maharaja ruled over a majority of Muslims; when insurgents from the North West Frontier started to invade Kashmir in order to annex it to Pakistan, the Maharaja acceded to India, the Indian army got in and the first Kashmir war started. There have been more wars over Kashmir between India and Pakistan. Both countries have gone nuclear. Bill Clinton called it “the most dangerous place in the world.” This was the reason Klaus Kübler talked on Kashmir.

Peter Leighton-Langer became witness to all this; he had been stationed in what became Pakistan, not very far from Kashmir. I therefore asked him whether he could not give a talk at the South Asia Institute of Heidelberg University on his personal experience as a commanding officer at the time of Partition. We arranged a lecture to our Pakistan working group where Peter Leighton-Langer retold the ghastly events as if they just had happened. He had kept his personal notes in German short hand and in German language that certainly nobody would be able to decipher. On top of it, nobody was interested in his accounts once the war was over and India independent.

Among us listeners in Heidelberg was a Pakistani professor of history, who specialises in the modern history of the North West Frontier. He hails from Nowshera, a major cantonment on the old road from Kolkata to Kabul, known as the Great Trunk Road. Nowshera is situated between the Indus in the east and Peshawar and the Khyber Pass in the west. It was here that Peter Leighton-Langer was stationed at the time of Partition. For the young professor it was time warp – living history. Here was a man who narrated things he only knew from tales of his elders and from history books, who even had been the highest ranking British officer in the garrison, in charge of checking the tribes on the Afghan border and of the retreat of the British from this part of India.

Peter Leighton-Langer was a gunner, commanding, as he proudly told, the “biggest guns between Delhi and Istanbul” or at least “between the Indus and the Turkish-Iranian border”. The reason for such heavy artillery was the control of the Afghan borders, or more precise, of the Pashtun tribes. The British had come to India as traders, the English East India Company enjoyed the privilege of a monopoly in the trade with India; by the mid 1900s they had gained control over much of the subcontinent. Russia at the same time had conquered most of Central Asia and were on their way to the “warm waters” of the India Ocean. Great Britain had taken over the company in 1858 and tried to keep the Russians away from Indian and from the sea. The fight over Central Asia became known as the “great game”, famously described in Rudyard Kipling in his novel “Kim”. The ultimate prize was Afghanistan. Contrary to popular belief, that Afghanistan was never conquered, it had been part of various empires throughout history. Most of the country, however, is mountainous and the people are very independent minded. The tribes, therefore, had always been left more or less to themselves. Much of Afghanistan was part of the Mogul Empire; in 1747 the Emir of Cabool (Kabul) finally gained independence. The British invaded Afghanistan twice and only in 1879 became kind of overlords over Afghanistan, controlling the foreign policy of the country but with little consequence to the tribes, except the Durand Line, a “boundary established in the Hindu Kush in 1893 running through the tribal lands between Afghanistan and British India, marking their respective spheres of influence; in modern times it has marked the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The acceptance of this line—which was named for Sir Mortimer Durand, who induced 'Abdor Rahman Khan, amir of Afghanistan, to agree” (www.britannica.com) The line cuts through the homeland of the Pashtuns and has greatly influenced international politics ever since, because one third of the Pashtuns live in Afghanistan, where they are the largest ethnic group although most probably not the majority of the people. The other two thirds of the Pashtuns live in Pakistan, that, however, has a much larger population than Afghanistan. The North West Frontier Province, where most of the Pakistani Pashtuns live, thus, is called a minority province. The Pashtun tribes share a belief in common descent and a common code of conduct, the *pakhtunwali*.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan started what became known as the Russian Afghanistan War and marked the last phase of the Great Game of the Twentieth Century between the Soviet Union and the United States. Millions of Afghan refugees, mostly Pashtuns, found shelter in Pakistan, often staying with relatives. The *mujahiddin* were then celebrated all over the world as Afghan freedom fighters; it was also the birth of an International Islamic Army (also: International Islamist Brigade), the infamous Al Qaeda, and of the Taliban. The Great Game of the Twenty-first Century again is over Central Asia, the north-west of the Subcontinent again being the playing field. But there are now more players.

Returning to British raj: Basically, British rule meant two things: revenue and law and order. After all, the East India Company was a private trading firm; revenue was a major source of profit; law and order were, economically speaking, costs: unavoidable in order to make sure that people paid their tax and to be kept as low as possible. Revenue was mainly land tax; land tax was raised in the plains where agriculture under irrigation was possible and profitable. Those regions, where taxes had been settled, were and are still are called “settled areas” (nothing to do with settlers). The hilly areas along the Afghan border are mostly rugged land, carrying little vegetation and are, thus, less suited for agriculture; they are also difficult to control. The British, thus, decided for a nominal rule: The main aim was to keep the Russians out and to hinder the wild tribes to raid the villages and towns of the plains. Therefore, the tribes were left untaxed; they even were paid subsidies.

During World War I the British feared that Germany together with the Ottoman Empire would try to invade British India via Afghanistan. But once the War was won and the Russian Empire lost in civil war they little resisted when Afghanistan demanded full independence. It was finally granted in 1921. Afghanistan never accepted the Durand Line, claimed “Pashtunistan”, more or less all areas west of the river Indus, and voted against Pakistan’s admission to the United Nations.

The idea of Pakistan had been especially popular in the Muslim diaspora in North and Central India. The people of the Frontier, however, were almost all Muslims, there were too few Hindus and Sikhs to be feared as a threat. Mohammad Jinnah, the “Father of the Pakistan” and first Governor General of the new dominion, therefore conceded the status quo to the tribes along the frontier. The Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) directly come under the President of Pakistan. No taxes are raised, no customs paid; laws do not apply automatically. The tribal areas have their own jurisdiction and defence of the border initially was left to the tribes which means that there was no army during the early years of Pakistan. Subsequent governments, however, civilian and military ones have tried to bring the tribes under their control. The “War on Terror” has been a perfect pretext to increase the military presence and to break tribal resistance.

In order to check the unruly tribes on their side of the Durand Line the British had built a garrison at Razmak in the early 1920s. It is 62 miles from Bannu, the nearest railhead, with which it now is connected by a metalled road. As Masud-ul-Hasan writes in his “Important Places of Pakistan” (Karachi: Ferozsons, c. 1974, p. 386): “Located on [a] 6500 ft. plateau, Razmak was once one of the largest British bases on the Frontier. Its three miles perimeter encompassed areas of barracks, messes, stables, swimming pools, squash courts, [a] pologround and theatres. In the thirties Razmak was known as the “Little London”, and it housed over 20,000 British and Indian troops. The cantonment of Razmak was abandoned in 1946. After having been deserted for 27 years, Razmak had again been occupied under the orders of the Government of Pakistan, and an effort is being made to revive the glory of old Razmak.” It was here and in Nowshera that Peter Leighton-Langer had been stationed. When he talked to us it was still before the terror acts in New York and Washington on 9/11 of 2001. By that time he had brought his memories to paper and had given me a copy for our library. We are thinking to bring in out as a book, preferably in English, as it would be of great interest in Pakistan. In autumn 2001 he wrote a post script, titled “Nicht weit von Tora Bora”, not far from Tora Bora. I shall quote from it (my translation): Our base was Razmak, at that time the biggest garrison in the British Empire. Razmak was situated exactly on the border between the tribal areas of Waziri in the north and the Mahsud in the south.

The enormous assembly of British-Indian might – six infantry battalions, a mountain artillery regiment, a squadron armoured vehicles and my guns – was thought to keep in check the two bellicose tribes. The Wazirs were less dangerous since normally they stuck to treaties and their code of honour kept them from capturing representatives of the Indian state without warning in order to release them against ransom. That was not the case with the Mahsud. Therefore the access to Razmak was restricted to the road from Bannu via Miranshah, Damdil and Gardai, whereas the road via Wana in the south, although shorter, was never used. By the way, the road to Razmak makes a bend to the south at Miranshah. If you go on straight you come to Parachinar and this is right on the border; the next town in Afghanistan is Tora Bora. Peter Leighton-Langer refers to the erstwhile headquarters of Osama bin Laden. It was heavily bombarded and later captured. The head of Al Qaeda, however, could not be caught.

The reason that Peter Leighton-Langer chose to write his note on Tora Bora must have been a *deja-vu*: All the problems that the US Army has on the Afghan side of the Durand Line and the Pakistan Army on the Pakistani one must have sounded too familiar to him: The difficulty to master the terrain and especially the very independent minded people.

This is also the matter of the controversy between the US and the Pakistan government. The US are accusing their most important coalition partner in the War on Terror not to do enough against Al Qaeda and the Taliban. The Pakistan president is arguing that more Pakistani soldiers have been killed than American ones and that Pakistan is doing their very best. Pakistan has refused US troops to pursue alleged terrorists and their supporters on Pakistan territory although there seem to have been a few such instances. One of the contenders for the office of US president recently suggested to send US troops to Pakistan if needed. This has been strongly rejected by all parties in Pakistan. The war in Afghanistan already has spilled over into the North West Frontier Province and into Balochistan; terrorist attacks have also reached all major towns, including the capital. The dramatic loss of the “King’s Party” in the recent elections is mainly because of the highly unpopular War on Terror. To put it in a historical perspective: Pakistan has seen prolonged periods of military rule, direct and indirect, always when Pakistan allied themselves to the USA: Pakistan had always looked for a strong and reliable partner against its arch-enemy India. Soon after Independence Pakistan started to ally themselves with the USA and their system of regional defence alliances. Pakistan joined the Baghdad-Pact, later the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and the South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) before the military took first over in 1958. They were rewarded with plenty of military and development aid. Pakistan’s economy grew remarkably; the country was seen as a model for development. It was less successful politically: In 1962 the USA asked Pakistan to join India in the war with China, Pakistan’s new friend; in 1965 the USA forced Pakistan to end the war against India and in 1971 the USA lent only half-hearted support to Pakistan in the war of secession in its eastern province, now Bangladesh, and in the war against India. Relations remained strained when Pakistan returned to democracy and did not improve after the military took over again in 1977. Relations reached an all-time low after the burning of the American Embassy in Islamabad in 1979. A few weeks later, however, Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan and Pakistan rose to become a frontline state in the last hot phase of the Cold War. Pakistan again received generous military and development aid and the economy boomed, but only until the Afghan war ended and the Soviet Union collapsed. It was also the end of military rule in Pakistan. The democratically elected government found themselves – like in the 1970s – confronted with an aid embargo because of Pakistan’s nuclear weapons programme. The economy lost its momentum. For the first time

Pakistan fell behind India, if measured by most development indicators. Finally, the country could just be saved from being declared a “terrorist state” and to become subject to severe economic sanctions. For fear of a total break down of law and order, Pakistan was granted enough aid to “not let it go to the wall”. Again a military coup preceded a new era of friendship: After 9/11 Pakistan again became a trusted ally; so far Pakistan has received around 11 bn US\$ military and development aid from the USA. As has been lamented in the US Congress, only one tenth of the money has been spent on development. But the economy again boomed and grew almost as fast as in neighbouring India.

Unfortunately, the great powers of the day have been and still are interested in the region is only for economic and strategic reasons, if at all: So far, no major sources of oil and gas have been proven, at least not of a size that would explain the prolonged military and economic engagement of the British, the Russians and the Americans: Today it is the access to the gas and oil finds of Central Asia that is important: As long as Iran is embargoed by the USA pipelines to the Indian Ocean from Turkmenistan have to cross Afghanistan and Pakistan. After neither the *mujahiddin* nor the Taliban could guarantee a steady flow of energy through Afghanistan, all hopes are now on Karzai. As for Pakistan, backing military regimes has a long tradition; keeping the rulers in power obviously has been more important than democracy.

As a last entry in Peter Leighton-Langer’s War Diary he wrote in English and in German, probably – as he presumed later – to make sure that it would be understood: “Pakistan is going to be the home of Asian Fascism. Pakistan wird das Heim des asiatischen Faschismus werden”. This disturbing prediction has to be seen in connection with the events that unfolded before Peter Leighton-Langer’s eye. He had to flee his motherland to escape physical extinction. In India he had been witness to large-scale violence of members of one community against the members of another community – less systematically, but as destructive. In Germany as in India it were the minorities who were to suffer. Equally, the military decided to restrict themselves to the role of bystanders – but there were exceptions. As The Times write in their obituary (www.timesonline.co.uk, June 13, 2007): “That August [of 1947], he and his gunners were put in the awkward position of keeping the peace between the Hindus and his Muslims – 2,000 Hindus, fleeing the carnage, took refuge in the empty barracks where he and his men mounted guard.” The massacres at the time of Partition could unfold, because the colonial power kept their armed forces out of the turmoil. In his report Peter Leighton-Langer describes the difficulties to stop the butchering. But the military leadership feared the outbreak of a civil war and thus restrained their activities to the attempt of an orderly dividing up the assets of the British-Indian Army and of the demobilizing British troops.

He had been asked to become an advisor to the army of the new state Pakistan. But what role would there be in a Pakistani army for a foreign military advisor? Besides, becoming a “military advisor” in Pakistan might be unhelpful for a military career in the British Army. He also had to think what kind of state Pakistan would develop into, and whether he should want to advise this state’s army. He decided to return to England, especially after hearing that his mother survived the Holocaust. He left the Army and began a career in business that finally brought him to Bensheim.

Whatever Pakistan has become, and what “Asian Fascism” might be: I do not think that Pakistan has become fascist. That there always have been strong strains of democracy is proven by the

recent resistance of the judges and lawyers. That President Musharraf had dismissed the Chief Judge of the Supreme Court and had arrested thousands of lawyers, and that he struck a deal with the leader of the opposition that put an end to legal persecution in a major corruption case, in short, that he put himself above the law, did not find consent by the electorate and caused the King's party's, i.e. the Muslim League (Q)'s, defeat in the election. That there are Islamic parties that he might term "fascist", is another thing. But they never managed to get a majority in any Pakistani parliament. They only could win three seats in the new National Assembly; they had many more in the 2002 elections that were, however, hardly "free and fair".

The army has ruled three times in Pakistan history, each time around a decade. Every time they got more involved in running the government and the economy. The army also became more and more a "state within the state". This runs contrary to the perception of the "professional soldier". Again, there are calls "back to the barracks". At the moment it does not look that the Army chief is going to intervene. That would be easy, as Musharraf had the constitution amended by an article that introduced a National Security Council, that gives the Army a role in government,

Peter Leighton Langer's manuscript carries the title "in die Freiheit entlassen?" – released into freedom? The question mark indicates his doubts. If you ask a Pakistani, he will tell you that Pakistan has been freed from colonial rule and Hindu supremacy. But it is still a semi-feudal society, as we just could witness: In her testament Benazir Bhutto, designated her 19-year old son to become her successor as leader of the Pakistan Peoples Party. Democracy is not yet too deep rooted in Pakistan. No party, with the exception – of all parties – of the Jamaat-i-Islam, ever had party elections.

But the resistance that the judges and lawyers as well as human rights activists like the lawyer Asma Jahangir, the professor of nuclear physics Pervez Hoodbhoy or the ex-cricketer Imran Khan have put up to an autocratic government might serve as proof, that the case of democracy is not lost in Pakistan. In the coming weeks and months we shall see that the president will try to ally his party with one of the opposition groups. That may not work out. Therefore, the American government seems to have advised the president not to hinder a coalition government of the two leading (opposition) parties and have asked the opposition parties not to try to impeach their trusted ally, the president. That might be difficult to work out. On the longer run it also has to be seen how the USA will end their military engagement in South West Asia. If they follow the popular demand to pull out of Iraq, they would have more resources at their hands for Afghanistan and even for Pakistan. More than half of the Indian army was once concentrated at the Frontier without ever effectively controlling the region. Going by Peter Leighton-Langer's experience they should not expect to achieve much.