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Direzione, Via Bosco degli Arvali 24, 00148 Roma

Contatti: direzione@nam-sigm.org ; virgilio.ilari@gmail.com

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Estandart Reyau d'a Cheneralísma, prencipal bandera carlista d'a primera guerra bordada por María Francisca de Braganza em 1833 Royal Standard of the General in Chief, main Carlist flag of the First War embroidered by Maria Francisca de Braganza in 1833). Wikimedia Commons

The Simla War Game of 1903

BY LUIGI LORETO

1. Simla – immortalised by Kipling – was the summer capital – from April to October – of the Raj and accordingly also the seat of the C-i-C (The Commander-in-Chief), India and of his GHQ (General Headquarters), India¹.

In 1903, at the behest of Lord Kitchener, who was the C-i-C since November 28, 1902, Simla hosted what was almost certainly the first operational-level war game in the history of the British armed forces – although *not* at the strategic level – and, more importantly, not an end in itself but with a planning function². This marked a turning point in the history of the use of this instrument, which until then had been limited to the tactical and training levels of the Staff College at Camberley.

On 29 March 1905 Claude Lowther, Member of Parliament for the Unionist Party and hero of the Boer War, observed in a speech that the Indian frontier – meaning obviously the North-West Frontier (NWF) – had become “...as vulnerable as the frontier of any European power...”³. It should therefore come as no surprise that the first application of the war game in this new role should be Indian and peripheral and not metropolitan.

And, since, at the operational level, in 1903, the only real macro-strategic scenario that could be conjectured was that of a war with Russia, it follows that the first use should be by the Indian C-i-C. A war with Russia, as the only conceivable land enemy, would be primarily fought and could only be fought on the NWF.

1 For a portrait of Simla and its society see e.g. Ch. Allen, *Kipling Sahib. India and the Making of Rudyard Kipling*, Little, Brown, London 2007, p. 134.

2 At least this is the first known to us; the documentation is certainly incomplete, but it should be noted that there is a lack of even indirect evidence of other precedents. The situation is slightly different for the Royal Navy.

3 Quoted in L. Friedberg, *The Weary Titan. Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895-1905*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2011², p. 265.

2. We do not have the original document which was over 200 pages long and included at least one map⁴ (4). However, it had been sent to the General Staff, War Office (WO) for the relevant “criticism”. Under the heading “Observations on the Records of a War Game played at Simla, 1903” it has been preserved the memorandum, in printed form, which was in turn forwarded to the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID), comprising a total of thirteen pages, dated 5 May 1904, classified at “Secret” level, containing the critical observations of the Director of Military Operations (DMO), Major-General James Moncrieff Grierson, as the competent authority; this were preceded by a summary of a few pages of the original records of the war game.⁵

The original map is not reproduced, but there is a critical note in the memorandum regarding its incompleteness. It is also reasonable to assume that it was modelled on those of the *Constable's Atlas*, both because it was the most recent and, moreover, because of the coincidence of an incompleteness of these too⁶, if not on those of the Survey Department, however merged into it.

In fact, the original document, in its complete version, was even more extensive and included three volumes of documentation, which have also been lost. Kitchener had sent a copy of it to the Prime Minister, Arthur Balfour, confidentially and through the private channel of Lady Alice Cranborne, the wife of Balfour's cousin, in whose private family archives the information has been preserved. Only a more reduced version had been sent to the WO⁷.

The war game had been arranged in the summer. And it is not possible that it was concluded later than the beginning of autumn, due to the return to the Indian capital in winter; indeed, the dating of the letter to Lady Alice on 6 August leads us to conclude that the war game was concluded at the latest by the end of July. We do not know the exact date of the forwarding of the documentation to the WO – which would appear to have had an initial passage through the India Office,

4 James Hevia's archival research in India also came to nothing, see J. Hevia, *The Imperial Security State. British Colonial Knowledge and Empire-building in Asia*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012, p. 164.

5 The National Archive, Kew (NA), Public Record Office (PRO), CAB 6/1/50, ff. 207-14.

6 J. G. Bartholomew (ed.), *Constable's Hand Atlas of India*, A. Constable, Westminster 1893, Pl. 22; 24.

7 See J. Pollock, *Kitchener: The Road to Omdurman and Saviour of the Nation*, Robinson, London 2002, p. 270 with references to the Cecil/Salisbury archive.

which was organically responsible for receiving it – and from there to Whitehall⁸. We know, however, that Kitchener delayed its dispatch to London, until he could verify the assumptions by comparison with those of the Intelligence Department of the WO, as he wrote to Frederick Lord Roberts, C-i-C, Forces (The Commander-in-Chief of the Forces), at the end of the year⁹.

On the other hand, the *non post quem* is constituted by the first of the two technical assessments – relating to the daily rate of railway construction – in an appendix to the memorandum dated April 28.

One wonders how and why, in 1903, Kitchener came to consider using a war game – remember, the first beyond the tactical level and the first planning-based – to support his conception of the manpower required to defend India. The personal interest in technical innovation of Kitchener, who, it should be remembered, came from the Royal Engineers, may be the likely explanation.

3. The operations covered in the war game are set in a fictional period from May to January.

We do not know what game system was used but its level certainly excludes the possibility that it could be the official rules of 1896, which are strictly at the tactical one¹⁰.

Similarly, we do not know who held the various commanding roles and who was the referee (Kitchener himself?).

The war game opens with the invasion of Afghanistan by a massive Russian army, which quickly overwhelms the local defenses. It ends with the operational defeat of the Anglo-Indian forces, who in turn had entered the country in force to counter the Russians. The situation would ultimately be saved only at the strategic level, as we will discuss later.

The operational details are marginal here. It is sufficient to recall that the Anglo-Indian forces would have been unable to halt the enemy columns, advancing along three main axes. Within a few months, the troops would have been pro-

8 Cf. W. Robertson, *From Private to Field Marshal*, Constable, London 1921, p. 135.

9 See Friedberg, *Titan*, p. 245 nt 14.

10 *Rules for the Conduct of the War-Game on a Map by Authority*, HM Stationery Office, London 1896.

gressively forced to retreat from their positions, until they were pushed back into Punjab by December, along the Landi Kotal, Kohat, Thal, and Bannu line in the northern theatre, and to abandon also Quetta in the southern theatre the following month, retreating beyond the Bolan Pass to Sibi.

From a strategic perspective, it should be emphasized that the war game assumes, as a given, the British decision to enter Afghanistan up to the Kandahar-Kabul line, and in no way includes the strategic assessment that led to this. In other words, it fails to explain why the Anglo-Indian forces did not initially establish an internal defensive line – relying on key strategic points, such as the two passes, Kyber and Bolan, and on the system of forts designed (for better or worse) to control the territory – which would have been difficult to overcome and would also have had the advantage of weakening and extending the Russian army's lines of communication. It is also remarkable that this observation of ours is not formulated, as an objection, in the critical assessment of the WO.

While in the background it is certainly influenced by the doctrine of the Forward School, as formulated by John Jacob and Henry Rawlinson a few decades earlier, it should however be noted that, currently, it presupposes the memorandum of the Intelligence Department of the WO of 10 March 1903, which in fact envisaged the fixing of the Anglo-Indian defence line on the Kabul-Kandahar axis in the event of a Russian invasion of Afghanistan¹¹.

It is worth remembering, though, that the war game also presupposes a tradition of at least twenty years of public reflections, not far from official contexts, on the scenario of a Russian attack on India – here it is of little relevance how unlikely and imaginary may be – from the book by Major-General Charles MacGregor in 1885 to that of Lord Curzon in 1889, to occasional mentions like that of Spenser Wilkinson in 1894¹².

11 NA, PRO, CAB 38/2/12.

12 G. Curzon, *Russia in Central Asia in 1889 and the Anglo-Russian Question*, London, Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., London 1889; M. Yapp, *The Legend of the Great Game*, in «Proceedings of the British Academy», 111 (2001), p. 194 ff.; R. Johnson, «Russians at the Gates of India». *Planning the Strategic Defence of India, 1884-1899*, «Journal of Military History», 67 (2003), pp. 697-743, which however remains incomplete, e.g. the reference to Curzon's book is missing; Spenser Wilkinson, *The Command of the Sea*, A. Constable, Westminster 1894, pp. 23-4.

4. The simulation takes place exclusively at the operational level and is limited solely to the Afghan regional theatre, while it does not consider the global developments of the overall war, which is assumed – in line with the standard macro-strategic scenario – to be with Russia and France. That is, it does not completely ignore a strategic and grand strategy scenario, but rather assumes it as a set of fixed, presupposed, and external coordinates, irrelevant to its unfolding. Specifically, it does not ignore the European chessboard, assuming, as mentioned, that the war is with Russia *and* France. Likewise, to the British operational defeat in Afghanistan corresponds, as a purely external variable, the conclusion of hostilities with a Russian retreat to the positions of Kabul and Jalalabad, awaiting the peace treaty, following “...the serious defeat the Russians had suffered both by land and sea in other parts of the world”, obviously not further specified.

5. In the memorandum, the war game is criticized because “it cannot be regarded as being based on conditions bearing a close resemblance to those which we are justified in supposing would obtain in an actual war”. Grierson, that is, does not contest the instrument – which, in fact, he will himself use less than a year later in another major war game aimed at demonstrating the need for intervention in a Franco-German war¹³ –, but he does not share its assumptions and results.

However, upon closer inspection, this also indirectly implies a criticism of the instrument itself, when Russian successes are attributed to “...the very...favourable conditions under which Russia commenced the war...”, contrasted with the diversity of conditions “in the actual war”, which in turn is based on consideration of “military history” that “absolutely proves” the enormous risks involved in sending unsupported detachments forward at the opening of a campaign. Further criticism follows regarding the realism of the possibility of a concentration of Russian troops in Central Asia before imperial reinforcements could be sent to India.

In other words, it is the theoretical excess of the scenario that Grierson calls into question, and this corresponds to the criticism of Robertson – who is probably, moreover, the substantial author of the memorandum – which we will see later.

Sir George Clarke, the Permanent Secretary of the CID, in turn, in several communications to Balfour between September and November 1904, would re-

13 NA, PRO, WO33/364.

peatedly comment even more critically on the results of the war game. In particular, he would too define the rate of Russian advance as “preposterous” and, after discussion with a senior geographer (who we believe likely, given the subject matter, to be Thomas Holdich), criticize the initial scenario and results as based on a profound ignorance of the geographical situation¹⁴. The *Kriegspiel* – as he calls it – as a whole would be defined by Clarke to the Prime Minister, on 24 November, as “...wholly inadequate and even positively misleading”, in particular attributing to it the growth in requests for reinforcements from an original number of 27,900 men in October 1903 to 158,700 in November 1904 (!)¹⁵.

Indirectly – that is, without specifically contesting it as such, but precisely like Grierson limiting himself to criticizing the conclusions on the merits – Clarke also grasps the intrinsic limits of the instrument, when he observes that “Great masses of men are moved across the most difficult country in the world as if they were pawns upon a chess board”¹⁶ – which is the typical flaw in the use of a war game as an epistemological instrument.

6. The “most important factors in the problem” addressed by the war game and its assesment are identified “for obvious reason” in the “question of transport and railway construction”¹⁷, on the two aspects of which the critical observations of the memorandum are correspondingly concentrated. The inadequacy of the Russian Central Asian railway system would be confirmed by a secret Anglo-Indian survey two years later¹⁸.

14 Quoted in Friedberg, *Titan*, p. 262.

15 Quoted in Friedberg, *Titan*, pp. 263-4, who is the first to have recalled and used this further documentation on the war game, together with other documentation with respect to which it remains the only one; less clear is its use by A. Rose, *Zwischen Empirie und Kontinent. Britische Außenpolitik vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg*, Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, München 2011, pp. 262 ff. who lingers on the complex of Clarke’s technical-logistical observations.

16 Clarke to Balfour, 24 November 1904, quoted in Friedberg, *Titan*, p. 263.

17 An interesting contextualisation of the Indian railway problem in relation to the Russian threat in S. Sweeney, *Financing India’s Imperial Railways, 1875–1914*, Taylor and Francis, London and New York 2011, pp. 79-80 who, commenting on the document, believes the reasons are far from obvious given the indistinguishability between the commercial and military functions of the railways, but his argumentation is not very clear. See also the important observations of Hevia, *State*, pp. 165 ff.

18 See Hevia, *State*, p. 165 nt 17.

It is also strange – as it goes against a constant of the major concerns of the Raj strategy – that the war game assumes only a generic hostility on the part of the tribes of the NWF, especially, for obvious reasons, those of the Swat Valley, but substantially the loyalty of the Indian Princes. In other words, it marginalises the internal security scenario, probably for reasons of political expediency, whereas reference to it could only have increased the calculation of the necessary reinforcements. In this it does not differ from the memorandum of March 1903 already mentioned¹⁹.

7. War games do not arise out of nowhere, that is, from a simple operational issue; they are inspired by broader and, to some extent, different underlying reasons, usually to support the broader policies of the various institutions from which they emanate, and these, in turn, respond primarily to personal, or rather group, career and promotion concerns.

The Simla one does not disprove this assumption.

On the contrary, the war game should be placed against the backdrop of the dialectic between C-i-C, India and WO in relation to the defensive needs of the subcontinent, especially the manpower needed to counter a Russian threat. And, in fact, even beyond, as we will see. It is symptomatic how Grierson himself, almost thirty years earlier, when serving in India, would have collaborated, as a young subordinate, in the identification of a strategic scenario *similar* to that of the war game which was the object of his criticisms in Whitehall²⁰.

The second, broader background against which it should be placed is that of a moment of reform and reorganisation of the metropolitan military structure: the application of the so-called “Esher Report” which involved the creation of the permanent secretariat of the CID – itself just constituted at the end of 1902 by Balfour –, from 6 February 1904, the suppression of the office of C-i-C, Forces and its replacement with that of Chief of the General Staff (GCS), the creation of the DMO directly under him, responsible for intelligence and mobilisation²¹.

19 NA, PRO, CAB 38/2/12. However, we cannot exclude, on the basis of the documentation cited by Pollock, *Kitchener, ib.*, that there was further consideration of the matter in the war game, only not included in the document sent to the WO.

20 In this regard, Hevia, *State*, p. 164, to whose observation on p. 171, precisely for this reason, we object that what changes is the perspective not the conception.

21 J. McDermott, *The Revolution in British Military Thinking from the Boer War to the*

This was accompanied by a significant turnover of personnel: the cessation from office of Lord Roberts as C-i-C, Forces and his replacement, on 12 February, by Sir Neville Gerald Lyttelton as the first new CGS; the arrival a few months earlier, as already mentioned, of Kitchener in India; the appointment of Clarke as secretary of the CID and that of Grierson as DMO, with two colonels destined for a brilliant career, Charles Edward Callwell and William Robertson, as assistants, immediately subordinated to him; the transfer of a staunch advocate of the primary role of the Royal Navy and instead only ancillary role of the Army, such as Hugh Oakeley Arnold-Forster, from the Admiralty to the WO.

8. In the war game, the Anglo-Indian forces engaged against the Russians numbered an improbable maximum of 189,000 men, as Grierson noted with surprise. He also observed that, based on available data, the troops present in India actually numbered only slightly more than 93,000; it is interesting to note, incidentally, that London does not have absolutely precise and official information on this matter. In contrast, the Russians employed a total army of 400,000.

In 1903 the CID had endorsed the fixing of the amount of reinforcements for India in the event of a war with Russia at 100,000, against the WO which did not consider it possible to exceed 70,000, which Lord Roberts would further reduce to 40,000 at the beginning of 1904. Instead, following the progress of the Russian Central Asian railway construction, Kitchener's Indian request would rise to 158,000.

In May 1904 Lyttelton would warn against an exclusive strategic fixation on India, and his DMO, Grierson, would argue that Kitchener's immediate assessment of the Russian danger was exaggerated. The WO would set the maximum possible level at 91,000, which would however have emptied England of all its strategic reserves, leaving her with no more than twenty battalions. At the CID meeting of 16 November, which dealt with Kitchener's request, the Secretary of State at the WO, the CGS and Grierson would reiterate the imperial strategic

Moroccan Crisis, in P. M. Kennedy (ed.), *The War Plans of the Great Powers 1880-1914*, Allen and Unwin, London 1979, pp. 102-5; T. G. Otte, 'The Methods in which we were schooled by Experience'. *British Strategy and Continental Commitment before 1914*, in K. Neilson – G. Kennedy (eds.), *The British Way in Warfare. Power and the International System, 1856–1956. Essays in Honour of David French*, Routledge, London 2010, pp. 308-12. For the history of the early years of the CID, the excellent work of N. d'Ombraïn, *War Machinery and High Policy. Defence Administration in Peacetime Britain, 1902-14*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1973 remains fundamental.

impossibility of it, unless the Islands and the Empire were emptied of all military reserves; this, in turn, would be impossible without introducing conscription or entering into an alliance with Germany, a conclusion reiterated at the immediately following meeting of 22 November²². Added to this is the fact that, from the point of view of the British army, this would have meant being reduced to a “supplier of reinforcements” for India, to use McDermott’s words²³.

Without going into further detail, it should be noted that in these months, while the government and Balfour were urgently seeking to quickly close the issue, Kitchener had the opposite urgency of delaying it until plans for a complete reorganisation of the Indian army had been defined²⁴.

It is against this background that Grierson made his critical observation of 18 April 1904, in response to Kitchener’s memorandum of 15 February, on the need for an overall plan from the Indian side to be submitted to the CID²⁵. Only seventeen days later – but, as mentioned, the document contains a technical appendix dated 28 April – did Grierson would formulate his critical comments on the proceedings of the war game which, as observed by Gooch²⁶, integrates precisely this plan and, we might add, in a more refined form in terms of the innovative and experimental nature of the applied instrument.

It is worth adding that in parallel, dated April 28, a request was sent to the Intelligence Department by Balfour – following the previous CID meeting – for a review of the strategic issues involved in a “future railway construction” in Persia and its use by Russia²⁷. These are obviously connected to the same object of the war game but it should be emphasised²⁸ that the request does not refer to it in any way.

22 McDermott, *Revolution*, pp. 105-107; in even greater detail, with divergences and important contextualisations, Friedberg, *Titan*, pp. 245 ff.; 256 ff.; 262-4 who interprets the objectives and role of the General Staff differently, especially p. 259 nt 208; see also Rose, *Empire*, pp. 261 ff. who however is partly confused in his use of documentation and does not fully grasp the wider complex of the issue which he erroneously traces back to a dimension of political propaganda, ignoring the works of both McDermott and Friedmann.

23 McDermott, *Revolution*, p. 105; also p. 107.

24 The contextualization by Friedberg, *Titan*, p. 245 is important and is congruently confirmed by Robertson’s observation which we recall further on.

25 NA, PRO, CAB 6/1/45D = 38/4/39.

26 Cf. J. Gooch, *The Plans of War. The General Staff and British Military Strategy c. 1900-1916*, Routledge, London 1974, p. 212.

27 NA, PRO, CAB 6/1/48D = CAB 38/4/37.

28 Against Rose, *Empire*, p. 261 who, referring to it – but without indicating the docu-

9. In particular, General Robertson – at the time, with the rank of colonel, we recall, Assistant DMO to Grierson – recalls in his memoirs – which up to now, with one exception²⁹, do not seem to have been taken into consideration as to what we are discussing – how the war game had been organised by Kitchener³⁰ “...to show how utterly wrong...” were the restrictive calculations of the WO that had not met with his approval.

On the moment, Kitchener would have achieved the desired effect. The proceedings, once they reached Whitehall, would have aroused “some excitement”, apparently constituting “terrible proof” of what Russia could do, demonstrating that the calculations of the WO were flawed.

However, Robertson – to whom the observations underlying the memorandum signed by Grierson would therefore essentially be attributable, something that has not been noted so far –, once the results of the Indian war game were examined, would instead have shown its intrinsic limitations.

And he caustically concludes that, although it is logical to assume the most pessimistic scenario, with his war game Kitchener “protested a little too much”.

10. Clearly, the dossier would not have ended with the observations of Grierson, *alias* Robertson. As the latter recalls, a long exchange of letters would have followed and the dispatch of officers from India to argue in favour of their own calculations against those of the DMO. In July 1904, Kitchener’s reply would have arrived – albeit in a non-alarmist tone – and the discussion would obviously have continued³¹ until the general change in the scenario resulting from the Russo-Japanese War and the double Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907.

In fact, Kitchener’s aim with his war game went beyond the mere question of the manpower needed to face a Russian threat and the real nature of this. As Robertson observes, their “real purpose” was to “obtain early sanctions” for the

ment number, erroneously speaks instead of a request by Balfour for a counter-verification “Gegenuntersuchung”) of the war game.

29 Hevia, *State, ib.*

30 Robertson, *Private*, pp. 135-6, hence the quotations.

31 Cf. Friedberg, *Titan*, pp. 253 ff.; 264 ff.; also Robertson, *Private*, p. 136; J. Gooch, *Sir George Clarke’s Career at the Committee of Imperial Defence, 1904-1907*, «The Historical Journal», 18 (1975), pp. 561-2.

comprehensive reforms of the Indian army that he supported³².

On the other hand, one cannot help but wonder how much Kitchener himself was genuinely convinced of the results of the simulation. His Sudanese campaign of 1897-98 had been entirely based not only on logistics but, in particular, on railways³³; the intrinsic limits for the Russian army could hardly have escaped him.

Similarly, it is difficult to imagine that the general – the second other pillar of whose Sudanese expedition had been military intelligence, entrusted to the famous Francis Reginald Wingate³⁴ – could really have been unaware of how improbable it was, to say the least, that the Russians could invade Afghanistan without any inkling on the British side and, above all, how a Russian attack on India was considered a very remote eventuality in both Anglo-Indian and metropolitan intelligence communities.

In light of this, the war game in its results seems to be rather an intentional solicitation to the metropolis.

The Simla war game has its own intrinsic interest, as the first case of the use of the war game tool at an operational level – not only in England but almost everywhere, even with respect to the German *Generalstab*.

At all events, its value as a source does not primarily relate to British macro- and geostrategic representation in its various structural components (WO, C-i-C, India, CID), where it simply fits into the context of Russia's positioning as the main potential enemy.

It pertains rather to the internal affairs of relationships and role definition between these various structures, and further with respect to other instances, especially the Royal Navy. In this context, it constitutes, along with the related discussion, only one documentary element with an instrumental-argumentative function, albeit a striking one due to the technical novelty of the instrument employed, within a much larger whole.

Instead, it would be a mistake to see it as evidence of a formalization of a real threat of an Anglo-Russian war.

32 Robertson, *Private*, p. 136; see Friedberg's observation, *supra*.

33 Most recently E. M. Spiers, *Engines for Empire. The Victorian Army and its Use of Railways*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 2015.

34 About him R. J. M. Pugh, *Wingate Pasha. The Life of General Sir Francis Reginald Wingate 1861-1953*, Pen & Sword, London 2011.

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