

THE GERMAN MISSION TO AFGHANISTAN 1915–1916

Symposium at the GHI, January 29, 2002. Convener: Christoph Mauch (GHI). Speaker: Thomas L. Hughes (GHI). Commentator: Hans-Ulrich Seidt (Cultural Attaché, German Embassy).

In December 2001, German troops were sent to Afghanistan on a peace-keeping mission. On the day of their arrival, the German Ambassador to the United States, Wolfgang Ischinger, was asked how the German troops were received in Kabul. "With the warmest possible enthusiasm," he reported. "We were reminded at once that Germany had been Afghanistan's unique and constantly reliable friend all through the twentieth century." It was no accident that after the liberation from the Taliban regime the different Afghan sections chose the Petersberg, an international meeting place near Bonn, as the venue for a crucial conference that drew up the road map to peace in Afghanistan.

Thomas Hughes's lecture focused on the origins of the close relationship between Germany and Afghanistan. He analyzed the political background and the geostrategic framework of the German mission to Kabul in 1915–1916. Right in the middle of World War I, Afghanistan was the goal of a German mission, led by a Bavarian officer, Oscar Niedermayer, and a Prussian diplomat, Werner-Otto von Hentig. They were acting as secret emissaries of the Kaiser, trying to convince the ruler of Afghanistan, Emir Habibullah, to launch an attack against British India. They brought with them two Indian revolutionaries, Mohammed Barakatullah and Kumar Mahendrah Pratap, who claimed to represent a provisional government of India in Kabul, planning to overthrow British rule over the entire subcontinent.

But the Germans and their allies did not succeed. Hughes explained in detail how the Emir kept close ties with the British masters of India. Disappointed, the German agents left Kabul in the spring of 1916 and, after adventurous travels, returned to Berlin via different routes. However, their months in Kabul laid the groundwork for far-reaching developments. One of these was the third Afghan War of 1919, which began shortly after the assassination of Emir Habibullah, plotted by the very same group in the Afghan leadership that had supported the Germans in 1915–1916. Another consequence was the growing self-confidence of the Afghan people vis-à-vis the British Raj in India. The arrival of the German mission in Kabul had clearly demonstrated the slow but steady decline of the British Empire. Fierce in their independence, the Afghans were now looking for friends abroad—and found them in Berlin. During the Weimar Republic, German engineers and teachers came to Kabul. Before

World War II, the Afghan army was equipped by Germany. And during the Cold War, the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic were competitors in Afghanistan, thus doubling the impact of economic aid and ideological influence. As a result, Germany owns two embassy compounds in Kabul today.

After the lecture, comments and questions focused on the continuity of German foreign policy and the German-Afghan relationship. The lively debate addressed both context and consequences of the German mission during World War I. It became clear, that after the visit of von Hentig and Niedermayer, all nation-building efforts in Afghanistan were influenced by the close contacts between Afghanistan and Germany. Both countries were intertwined in a unique way that helped to develop mutual respect and understanding. Against this background, the UN talks on Afghanistan on the Petersberg in November and December 2001 were another step on a long road. It will hopefully lead to peace, stability, and prosperity in a country that has suffered terribly since the Soviet invasion in 1979.

Hans-Ulrich Seidt