

*No ‘Signs of Weakness’: Gendered violence and masculine authority on the North-West Frontier of British India**

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Abstract

On 14 April 1923, in the dead of night, an English girl was kidnapped from her bedroom in a military bungalow in the Kohat Cantonment on India’s North-West Frontier. The kidnapping is a notorious incident that has been told and retold in multiple languages, disciplines, and media for almost a century. From the colonial perspective, the kidnapping was seen as an ‘outrage’ that demonstrated the lawless savagery of the tribes who inhabited this strategically significant Indo-Afghan borderland. From the local perspective, the kidnappers led by Ajab Khan Afridi were valiant heroes who boldly challenged an alien and oppressive regime. This article adopts a gendered lens of historical analysis to argue that the case offers important conceptual insights about the colonial preoccupation with frontier security. In the British empire, the idea of the frontier signified a racial line dividing civilization from savagery. The colonial frontier was also a zone of hyper-masculinity where challenges to state power were met with brutal violence in a muscular performance of masculine authority. In this space where ‘no signs of weakness’ could be shown, the abduction of Molly Ellis represented an assault on the fictive image of white, male invincibility and the race-gender hierarchy that defined the colonial system.

Introduction

On 14 April 1923, Molly Ellis, an English teenager, was awakened at around 2 a.m. by the sound of her mother calling out for her. In the dim light of a

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hurricane lamp, Molly barely made out the figures of two men struggling with her mother—one of them was holding a dagger. Molly's father, Major Archibald Ellis, was away on duty at the time. On nights when it was just the two of them, Molly and her mother Ellen slept in the same bedroom under a large mosquito net. Since arriving on India's North-West Frontier several months prior, Mrs Ellis had been afraid that something terrible might happen to her and her family in the Kohat Cantonment where they were posted. Her husband gave her a whistle to blow three times in the event of an emergency. He instructed the guard, positioned a few hundred yards away, not to approach the family's quarters unless summoned by the blast of the whistle.

In the adjacent bungalow, Captain Hyland and his wife were roused from sleep by the growling of their two dogs. As soon as he heard the guard yelling '*daku! daku!*' (thief! thief!), Captain Hyland grabbed his pistol and rushed next door. Mrs Hyland stayed behind, nervously clutching one dog on either side of her. When he entered the Ellis's bedroom, Captain Hyland found Mrs Ellis dead, her throat cut. He grabbed the whistle and handed it to a servant, who blew it sharply three times. The guard hurried over but it was too late—the intruders had already escaped with several rugs, two animal skins, a camera, a watch, and Molly, who was 17 years old at the time.

When the news reached him, Kohat Deputy Commissioner C. E. Bruce dispatched a terse priority telegram to Sir John Maffey, the chief commissioner of the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP): 'Regret to report Mrs. Ellis murdered about 2 a.m. and appears Miss Ellis carried off. No shots fired. Troops turned out. Will report fully later.'¹ Calls were placed to the Frontier Constabulary posts along the Kohat Pass advising them to look out for the kidnappers on all paths into semi-independent tribal territory where the Government of India had no legal jurisdiction.² The local Afridi and Orakzai tribes were warned that they would be held collectively culpable for the crime if they gave the group shelter or safe passage. In a longer report sent a few days later, Bruce observed:

The most horrible crime which in savagery and brutality more than vies with the foul murder of Colonel and Mrs. Foulkes in Kohat in 1920 was committed in Kohat

¹ See Colonel Bruce's full report dated 19 April 1923, in India Office Records, London (IOR), L/PS/10/1062.

² Members of the Frontier Constabulary performed 'watch and ward' duties along the administrative border, guarding against transborder raids and the escape of outlaws into the semi-independent tribal territory beyond British jurisdiction.

Cantonment when poor Mrs. Ellis, the wife of Major Ellis, D.S.O., of the Border Regiment, was foully done to death and her daughter Miss Ellis, of about 18 years of age, was kidnapped and carried off (at least we must surmise this as she was found to be missing). It was at about 2:30 to 2:45 am that the Superintendent of Police sent his motor to my bungalow informing me shortly of what had occurred. I quickly slipped into some clothes and proceeded in motor to the spot.³

The abduction of Molly Ellis was an international scandal charged with symbolic significance. From the British perspective, the intimately gendered dimension of this particular attack—a white woman killed and her daughter kidnapped from the bedroom of a colonial military bungalow—provoked heightened anger and anxiety. Contemporary English-language newspapers printed sensational accounts of the incident. A *London Times* headline read: ‘ANOTHER FRONTIER OUTRAGE: one lady killed and one kidnapped.’⁴ The *New York Times* declared: ‘CAPTIVE ENGLISH GIRL IS SEEN WITH SAVAGES’,⁵ above an article that described the kidnappers as ‘primitive savages—big, rawboned, devil-may-care fellows of great strength and hardihood, many of whom devote their whole existence to hunting, fighting, and brigandage’. Another *New York Times* article referred to the anxiety produced by recent attacks in the region, while noting that ‘[t]he abduction of Miss Ellis and the cold-blooded murder of her mother stirred Europeans in India more than many other outrage by tribesmen in recent years’.⁶

Stories about the kidnapping of Molly Ellis and the murder of her mother by Ajab Khan Afridi and his three accomplices have been told in many languages, disciplines, and media for almost a century. In the colonial archive, the incident figures as an extreme example of the mortal danger presented by what British officials called ‘frontier fanaticism’ and ‘tribal turbulence’.⁷ Within this narrative framework, the kidnapping was an ‘outrage’ that demonstrated the lawlessness of people and the threat they posed to the lives of Britons in the region and to the stability of the Indian empire more broadly. The episode is mentioned in most popular

³ Report from Lieutenant-Colonel C. E. Bruce, District Commissioner, Kohat, 19 April 1923, IOR, L/PS/10/1062.

⁴ *The Times of London*, 16 April 1923.

⁵ *The New York Times*, 19 April 1923.

⁶ *The New York Times*, 23 April 1923.

⁷ The majority ethnic group on the frontier was the Pukhtuns (also spelled Pashtun, Pushtun, Pakhtun, and Pathan). B. D. Hopkins traces the history of the colonial discourse about Pushtuns and ‘tribal turbulence’ in *The making of modern Afghanistan* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

English-language histories and personal memoirs of British colonial-frontier life, in several historical and anthropological studies, and in a broad assortment of other accounts.⁸ In May 1978, as part of director/producer Stephen Peet's 'Yesterday's Witness' documentary series about British social history, the BBC aired a segment entitled 'Frontier Outrage', featuring interviews with several eyewitnesses to the event, including Molly Ellis. After the so-called US 'war on terror' was launched in 2001, Ajab Khan began to make appearances in American counter-insurgency literature. David Kilcullen, former counter-insurgency adviser to General David Petraeus and Special Advisor for Counterinsurgency to then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, published a book in which he drew a link between Osama bin Laden's 'ability to spread contagion via globalization pathways' and the 'long line of charismatic extremist fugitive leaders who have hidden out in remote mountain areas and waged guerilla warfare against local authorities', including Ajab Khan.⁹

The legend of Ajab Khan Afridi endures in local collective memory and cultural forms that portray him as a valiant son of the soil who courageously challenged the alien government to defend of the honour of his people. For decades, tales of Ajab's heroic defiance were told and retold in Pashto poems and ballads that were performed in village *hujras* (male gatherings) and sold as audio recordings in Peshawar's Khissa

⁸ Olaf Caroe, *The Pathans* (London: Macmillan, 1958); David Edwards, *Heroes of the age: moral fault lines on the Afghan frontier* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Bern Glatzer, 'Being Pashtun, being Muslim: concepts of person and war in Afghanistan', in *Essays on South Asian society: culture and politics II*, (ed.) B. Glatzer (Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 1998), pp. 83–94; Sana Haroon, *Frontier of faith: Islam in the Indo-Afghan borderland* (London: Hurst, 2007); James W. Spain, *The way of the Pathans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962); David Hart, *Guardians of the Khyber Pass* (Lahore: Vanguard, 1985); Victoria Schofield, *Every rock, every hill: a plain tale of the North-West Frontier and Afghanistan* (London: Buchan and Enright, 1984); Victoria Schofield, *Afghan frontier: at the crossroads of conflict*; and Arthur Swinson, *Northwest Frontier: people and events, 1839–1947* (New York: Praeger, 1967).

⁹ David Kilcullen, *The accidental guerrilla: fighting small wars in the midst of a big one* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). Kilcullen was also a major contributor to the *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide* (United States Department of State, January 2009), available at <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=38828> [accessed 20 June 2019]. Michael Lambert, a Canadian army officer with 'a strong academic interest in oriental history and politics', self-published a basic account of the incident with the express purpose of providing 'lessons for current era soldiers' in Afghanistan. Lambert's *The kidnapping of Mollie Ellis by Afridi tribesmen* (Ottawa, 2009, posted online as a pdf on his website and no longer available) features glaring factual errors and does not meet basic standards of historical scholarship.

Khwani Bazaar.¹⁰ Several film versions of the story were produced, beginning with Khalil Kaiser's 1961 Urdu-language hit, *Ajab Khan*. Punjabi- and Pashto-language versions soon followed. In 1991, the Kabul-based Khushal Cultural Society published a collection of articles in Pashto commemorating the life of Ajab Khan Afridi.¹¹ In 2012, Dr A. Q. Khan, a founding father of Pakistan's nuclear programme, published an admiring article about Ajab Khan and the 'wily British' in Pakistan's English-language daily *The News*.¹² The line separating verifiable facts from storied rumours about the incident has always been blurred; living relatives of several figures connected to the story wrote to Dr Khan to correct certain factual errors in his column. To this day, Ajab's memory is celebrated on blogs, Facebook posts, and online animations. In spite of the widespread and enduring popular interest in the story of Ajab Khan, the history of the kidnapping has received limited scholarly attention.

Although the kidnapping of a white girl and the murder of her mother would have horrified British colonial society anywhere in the empire, the site of this particular incident was especially significant. Colonial authorities framed India's North-West Frontier as a space of hyper-masculinity where 'lean and keen'¹³ Britons faced off against the 'barbarism of a fine manly and courageous people'.¹⁴ Successive generations of colonial officials insisted that no 'signs of weakness'¹⁵ could be shown before the region's 'fierce and bloodthirsty'¹⁶ people

¹⁰ Wilma Heston and Mumtaz Nasir, *The bazaar of the storytellers* (Islamabad: Lok Virsa Publishing House, 1988). It is beyond the scope of this article to examine the specific local purposes served by vernacular stories about Ajab Khan or to explore connections between these stories and older genres. See James Caron, 'Reading the power of printed orality in Afghanistan: popular Pashto literature as historical evidence and public intervention', *The Journal of Social History*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2011, pp. 172–194.

¹¹ *A collection of papers read at the gathering commemorating the anniversary of Ajabkhan Afridi* (Kabul: Khushal Cultural Society, 1991). See also Nasrullah Afridi's master's thesis, 'Ajab Khan Afridi: a legendary Pukhtoon figure', Pakistan Study Centre, University of Peshawar (Session 1996–98).

¹² A. Q. Khan, 'Ajab Khan Afridi', *The News*, 26 March 2012.

¹³ Sir Harcourt Butler, Foreign Secretary to the GOI, quoted in T. C. Coen, *The Indian political service: a study in indirect rule* (London: Chatto, 1937), p. 37.

¹⁴ George Roos-Keppel to Lord Hardinge, 20 December 1915, in George Roos-Keppel's Private Papers, IOR, L/PS/11/299.

¹⁵ 'The frontier problem' printed in 'Employment of aircraft on the North-West Frontier of India' (Delhi, 1924), National Archives of India, New Delhi (NAI), Foreign and Political/Frontier/1923/File No. 328 (II)-F.

¹⁶ R. C. Temple's observations from 1856 quoted in C. C. Davies, *The problems of the North-West Frontier, 1890–1908*, 2nd and enlarged edn (London: Curzon Press, 1975), p. 37.

and characterized the 'troublesome tribes'¹⁷ as wild beasts who roamed across an archaic landscape. The racialization of the tribes justified the relentless colonial violence directed against them. As one British official ominously remarked: 'we cannot rein wild horses with silken braids.'¹⁸ Brutes were to be treated brutally. Civil servant Alfred Lyall coolly captured the violence embedded in colonial-frontier discourse when he observed: 'we treated the line of savage tribes as a quickset hedge.'¹⁹ Humans conceived of as hedges could be cut back or even pruned to the ground when they became too unruly.

This article argues that the frontier was a racialized zone of competing masculinities where challenges to state power were met with violence of various kinds. Sociologist Robb Willer theorizes that 'men react to masculinity threats with extreme demonstrations of masculinity'.²⁰ According to Willer's 'masculine overcompensation thesis', such reactions tend to involve hyper-masculine traits and behaviours, especially violence. Willer observes that 'masculine overcompensation' reveals feelings of underlying insecurity held by men who attempt to 'pass' as being something they are not. This article draws on Willer's theory to reframe our understanding of the colonial obsession with frontier security as an example of 'masculine overcompensation'. The need to preserve a fictive image of white, male invincibility on the frontier, to sustain the "bluff" that was colonialism²¹ in the face of perceived 'masculinity threats', led colonial officials to 'overdo gender' in ways that led to extreme violence.

The abduction of Molly Ellis was interpreted by colonial officials as an assault on British honour. They worried that the failure to promptly arrest and punish Ajab Khan and his 'Kohat gang' would damage colonial prestige by revealing 'the apparent powerlessness of the authorities to protect British officers and their wives even in their bungalows'.²² In

¹⁷ Letter from George Roos-Keppel to Lord Hardinge, 20 December 1915, in Roos-Keppel's Private Papers, IOR, L/PS/11/299.

¹⁸ John William Kaye, *History of the war in Afghanistan: in three volumes*, vol. 1 (London, 1857), p. 124.

¹⁹ Sir Alfred Lyall, 'Frontiers and protectorates', *The Eclectic Magazine of Foreign Literature, Science and Art*, vol. 54, no. 4, October 1891, p. 439.

²⁰ Robb Willer, Christabel L. Rogalin, Bridget Conlon, and Michael T. Wojnowicz, 'Overdoing gender: a test of the masculine overcompensation thesis', *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 118, no. 4, January 2013, p. 981.

²¹ Kim A. Wagner, "'Calculated to strike terror": the Amritsar massacre and the spectacle of colonial violence', *Past & Present*, vol. 233, no. 1, November 2016, p. x.

²² *Civil and Military Gazette*, 13 November 1923, NAI, Foreign and Political/1923/File No. 630-F.

the ‘white man’s world’²³ of empire, the inability to protect ‘their women’, and the inversion of power it signified, had dangerous implications. Real and imagined acts of native violence were perceived to pose a significant threat to the colonial system.²⁴ This was especially true on this strategically significant and contested colonial borderland where British authority was tenuous, uncertain, and constantly confronting challenges of different kinds. If Britain’s manliest men could not protect ‘their women’ in the militarized space of a cantonment bedroom, what did this say about the purported strength of imperial masculinity and the invincibility of the empire it claimed to represent?

Colonial violence on the racial frontier

The annexation of the Punjab in 1849 extended Britain’s Indian empire to its north-western limits. British officials viewed the North-West Frontier in military and strategic terms as key to the defence of British India and the empire more broadly.²⁵ ‘The frontier’—as it was generically known—was governed by the Punjab provincial government until 1901, when the Government of India created a separate North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) under its immediate charge and supervision. The NWFP comprised administered settled districts (where taxes were collected) and un-administered tribal tracts that formed a narrow, mountainous strip of territory separating British India from neighbouring Afghanistan. The settled districts in the plains were marked off from the tribal tracts in the hills by an internal administrative boundary, making ‘the

²³ Bill Schwarz, *The white man’s world: memories of empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). See also Ann Laura Stoler, ‘Making empire respectable: the politics of race and sexual morality in 20th century colonial cultures’, *American Ethnologist*, vol. 16, no. 4, 1989, pp. 634–660.

²⁴ See, for example, Dane Kennedy, *Islands of white: settler society and culture in Kenya and Southern Rhodesia, 1890–1939* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press); and Jock McColluch, *Black peril, white virtue: sexual crime in Southern Rhodesia, 1902–1935* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

²⁵ Recent historical studies of imperial-frontier policy include: Hugh Beattie, *Imperial frontier: tribe and state in Waziristan* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2002); James Hevia, *The imperial security state: British colonial knowledge and empire-building in Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Brandon Marsh, *Ramparts of empire: British imperialism and India’s Afghan frontier, 1918–1948* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); and Robert Nichols, *Settling the frontier: land, law and society in the Peshawar Valley, 1500–1900* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2001).

frontier'²⁶ a zone delineated by an interior and an exterior border.²⁷ Colonial officials often referred to this geographical zone as *Yaghistan*, 'land of the rebels'.²⁸ The Kohat Cantonment, where the Ellis family were posted, sat right on the edge of the administrative boundary.

The British claimed political control but no legal authority over people in the semi-independent tribal tracts. They sought to maintain a 'buffer'²⁹ zone to guard British India from foreign invasion, promising the transborder tribes 'non-interference' in their internal affairs in exchange for their cooperation in protecting British subjects in the settled districts from transborder raids, robbery, kidnapping, and other crimes. Continuous engagement with the transborder tribes was required to manage (rather than govern) them under a system of indirect rule. Written agreements with the colonial state offered the tribes an annual allowance in exchange for the promise of 'peaceful and friendly relations' with the government. The majority of transborder tribes entered into such agreements in the decades following annexation. The typical agreement detailed the services demanded by the state (such as border security, control of raiders, denial of sanctuary to and surrender of criminals) and the terms of the allowance. The allowances (known as *muwajib*), generally paid in guns and money, were part of the coercive machinery designed to induce compliance (what was paternalistically called 'good behaviour') and to minimize what colonial officials euphemistically dubbed 'tribal disturbances'.³⁰

²⁶ In using colonial sources as evidence, one invariably confronts the problem of whether or not to use colonial terminology. In this article, I use colonial language (such as 'tribe' and 'the frontier') even as I recognize that these terms are problematic colonial constructions. For further analysis, see Magnus Marsden and Benjamin Hopkins, *Fragments of the Afghan frontier* (London: Hurst, 2012).

²⁷ See the general and informative study by Lal Baha, *N.W.F.P. administration under British rule, 1901–1919* (New Delhi: National Commission on Historical and Cultural Research, 1978).

²⁸ Caroe, *The Pathans*, p. 347. For historical analysis of the term, see Amin Tarzi, 'Islam, shari'a and state building under 'Abd al-Rahman Khan'; and Sana Haroon, 'Competing views of Pashtun tribalism, Islam and society in the Indo-Afghan borderlands', in *Afghanistan's Islam: from conversion to the Taliban*, (ed.) Nile Green (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), pp. 129–162.

²⁹ On the imperial 'buffer', see Lyall, 'Frontiers and protectorates', pp. 433–444. See also Richard Temple, 'Report showing the relations of the British government with the tribes, independent and dependent, on the North-West Frontier of the Punjab', *Selection from the Records of the Government of India, 1856* (Calcutta: Government of India, n.d.).

³⁰ The Government of India maintained official reports on 'tribal disturbances' and other frontier matters in a series of Political and Secret Department Memoranda (1840–

If the agreements and allowances represented the conciliatory hand of British power along the frontier, the other hand presented a gloves-off approach that used force and violence to achieve colonial objectives.³¹ The state's punitive machinery rested on a theory of collective, tribal responsibility according to which the tribe as a whole was held accountable for the actions of one member.³² The idea of communal responsibility derived from the British interpretation of the principles and practices of tribal culture.³³ Working through the personal influence of its political officers and the agency of local *jirgas* (councils), the state took punitive action against the tribes using precolonial methods such as *bandish* (reverse blockades that economically pressured people into submission by cutting off access to markets, trade, and grazing land) and *barampta* (hostage-taking reprisals involving seizure of people, animals, and property).³⁴

The state also inflicted colonial methods of punishment, including punitive expeditions. A variant of the 'small wars'³⁵ waged in colonial borderlands in Africa, Asia, and Australia,³⁶ punitive expeditions involved sudden, short, and spectacular displays of violence followed by the prompt withdrawal of troops. They were carefully choreographed to terrify and terrorize, performing the overwhelming strength of colonial

1947) located at IOR, L/PS/18. Critics of the allowances dismissed them as a costly and ineffective form of blackmail, which had ballooned to 53 *lakh*. P. S. Sivaswami Aiyar in Official Report of Legislative Assembly Debates, 21 and 22 September 1921, vol. 2, no. 7, IOR, L/PS/11/202.

³¹ Recent scholarship on the frontier has sought to nuance our understanding of how colonial power in the region operated. Hugh Beattie, Mark Condos, and Gavin Rand emphasize that not all British strategies relied on force and violence, giving the examples of hostage-taking and material deprivations. A shortcoming of this approach is the narrow understanding of what constitutes 'violence'. See Hugh Beattie, 'Hostages on the Indo-Afghan border in the later nineteenth century', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 43, no. 4, October 2015, pp. 557–569; and Mark Condos and Gavin Rand, 'Coercion and conciliation at the edge of empire: state-building and its limitations in Waziristan, 1849–1914', *The Historical Journal*, vol. 61, no. 3, 2018, pp. 695–718.

³² On collective responsibility, see Herbert B. Edwardes, *Memorials of the life and letters of Major General Sir Herbert B. Edwardes*, vol. 1 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, 1886), p. 230.

³³ See Caroe, *The Pathans*, pp. 346–359.

³⁴ See Beattie, *Imperial frontier*.

³⁵ C. E. Callwell, *Small wars: their principles and practice* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1896).

³⁶ Chris Ballard argues that the first consistent use of the term 'punitive expedition' is found on India's North-West Frontier. See Chris Ballard, 'Swift injustice: the expedition of imperial punishment', *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, vol. 18, no. 1, Spring 2017.

power and impressing upon people the futility of resistance.³⁷ Frontier officials described the punitive expedition as a form of just retribution against 'predatory barbarians'³⁸ who existed in 'a state of war by nature'³⁹ in 'countries which had never before known law and order'.⁴⁰ Punitive expeditions were deployed in response to a perceived crisis or 'outrage', such as an assault on a European or a raid on a police or military arsenal.⁴¹ As Punjab Lieutenant Governor Fitzpatrick observed in 1901, the punitive expedition also served a pedagogical function: 'When we first took over the Punjab, the frontier tribes had been in the habit of raiding pretty much at their good will and pleasure. They had to be taught what our strength was and one of the most effectual ways of teaching them was by punitive expeditions.'⁴² In the 50 years following annexation, British officials dispatched 50 punitive expeditions in which entire villages, terraced fields, trees, crops, and livestock were

³⁷ Gavin Rand argues that colonial expeditions on India's North-West Frontier were 'cultural projects' informed by the weaponization of colonial knowledge. He observes that they could also be used to gather colonial knowledge and advance colonial interests. See Gavin Rand, 'From the Black Mountain to Waziristan: culture and combat on the North-West Frontier', in *Culture, Conflict and the Military in Colonial South Asia*, (eds) Kaushik Roy and Gavin Rand (New York: Routledge, 2017). By comparison, Lyndall Ryan argues that 'punitive expedition' was a euphemism for massacre in Australia. See Lyndall Ryan, 'Untangling aboriginal resistance and the settler punitive expedition: the Hawkesbury River Frontier in New South Wales, 1794–1810', *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2013, pp. 219–232. On the spectacle of colonial terror in British India, see Wagner, 'Calculated to strike terror', pp. 185–225. For a comparative case, see Hal Langfur, 'Moved by terror: frontier violence as cultural exchange in late-colonial Brazil', *Ethnohistory*, vol. 52, no. 2, Spring 2005, pp. 255–289.

³⁸ Lyall, 'Frontiers and protectorates', p. 439.

³⁹ Edward E. Oliver, *Across the border or Pathan and Biloch* (London: Chapman and Hall, Limited, 1890), p. 230.

⁴⁰ *Imperial Gazetteer of India: North-West Frontier Province* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2002), p. 20.

⁴¹ My thoughts about punitive expeditions draw upon and are inspired by an unpublished paper delivered by Chris Ballard at a conference organized by Philip Dwyer on 'Violence, Colonialism and Empire in the Modern and Contemporary World' held at The British Academy in London (June 2015). See the 'Special Issue: Punitive Expeditions' guest edited by Ballard and Bronwen Douglas in *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, vol. 18, no. 1, Spring 2017.

⁴² Fitzpatrick's 'Opinion' of 17 January 1901 is cited in M. Samarth's 'Minute of Dissent' in *Report of the North West Frontier Enquiry Committee and Minutes of Dissent by T. Rangachariar and N.M. Samarth*, NAI, Foreign and Political/1923/File No. 34-F, p. 137. On colonialism's 'pedagogy of violence', see Partha Chatterjee, *The black hole of Calcutta: history of a global practice of power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

destroyed by colonial troops, whether burned to the ground or ploughed with salt.⁴³ The imperial treasury spent another Rs 290,000,000 on punitive expeditions in the first two decades of the twentieth century before aerial bombing became the preferred method of controlling tribal populations.⁴⁴ As Philip Mason, a colonial officer-turned-historian, observed:

the tribes were still treated like tigers in a national park. They could kill what deer they liked in the park; they risked a bullet if they came outside and took the village cattle. That had been the position in 1900 and it was still a fair description in 1947.⁴⁵

Colonial knowledge about the frontier relied upon and reproduced an essentialized and static understanding of tribal society structured by a rigid, immutable cultural code and ‘barbarous and blood-thirsty customs’.⁴⁶ As a result, colonial ideas about an unchanging, primitive people acquired a timeless quality.⁴⁷ There may have been policy shifts over time but the ‘frontier problem’—framed as a problem of ‘primitive human nature’⁴⁸—remained constant. In the archive of what Nicholas

⁴³ Barton, *India's North-West Frontier* (London: John Murray, 1939), p. 59. See also H. L. Nevill, *Campaigns on the North-West Frontier* (London: J. Murray, 1912); H. C. Wylly, *From the black mountain to Waziristan* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1912). The writings published by military officers on these expeditions are documentary sources that Gavin Rand argues should be critically analysed rather than taken as impartial accounts. Rand, ‘From the Black Mountain to Waziristan’.

⁴⁴ Official Report of Legislative Assembly Debates, 21 and 22 September 1921, vol. II, no. 7, Political and Secret (Departmental Papers), 1912–30, IOR, L/PS/11/202. For a broader perspective in aerial policing, see David Omissi, *Air power and colonial control: the Royal Air Force, 1919–1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990); Priya Satia, ‘The defense of inhumanity: air control in Iraq and the British idea of Arabia’, *American Historical Review*, vol. 111, no. 1, February 2006, pp. 16–51.

⁴⁵ Philip Mason, *The men who ruled India: the guardians* (Oxford: Alden Press, 1954), p. 95.

⁴⁶ W. R. Merk, Commissioner and Superintendent, Peshawar Division to Officiating Chief Secretary, Punjab, 25 January 1898, quoted in ‘Report on The Frontier Crimes Regulation, 1901 (III of 1901)’, Government of India Legislative Proceedings, September 1901. On the ways in which colonial shaped state policy and affected how Pukhtuns came to define themselves and their relationship with the colonial state, see Elizabeth Kolsky, ‘The colonial rule of law and the legal regime of exception: frontier “fanaticism” and state violence in British India’, *The American Historical Review*, vol. 120, no. 4, October 2015, pp. 1218–1246.

⁴⁷ An early attempt to ‘demystify’ the colonial encounter is provided in Akbar Ahmed, ‘Colonial encounter on the North-West Frontier Province: myth and mystification’, *Economic & Political Weekly*, vol. 14, no. 51–52, 22 December 1979.

⁴⁸ Note by Captain W. R. Hay on ‘The blood feud in Waziristan’, 1929, NAI, Foreign and Political/316-F.

Dirks calls the 'ethnographic state',⁴⁹ the tribesmen appear as 'refractory savages'⁵⁰ with 'an excitable and revengeful temperament'⁵¹ who were 'utterly reckless of human life'⁵² and destined by religion, culture, and geography to commit acts of murderous violence and menacing 'depredations' of various kinds. According to a mimetic logic that weaponized colonial knowledge about Pushtun culture, 'rude and savage'⁵³ men driven by codes of honour and revenge to 'quarrel, kill and plunder'⁵⁴ had to be taught a 'lesson of obedience'⁵⁵ in the only language they supposedly understood: the language of force.⁵⁶

Colonial violence on India's North-West Frontier reflected broader ideological shifts across the empire in the second half of the nineteenth century as the liberal civilizing mission gave way to a hardened view about populations deemed 'too savage' to be civilized.⁵⁷ A majority

⁴⁹ Dirks argues that, after 1857, anthropology replaced history as the primary modality of colonial knowledge in India. Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of mind: colonialism and the making of modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 43–60.

⁵⁰ Davies, *The problems of the North-West Frontier*, p. 123.

⁵¹ Extract of a (Secret) letter from Major A.E.B. Parsons, Member Frontier Enquiry Committee, to E.B. Howell, 30 August 1931, IOR, MSS Eur D 696/7 (Parsons Collection).

⁵² 'Note on Sir Bartle Frere's Memorandum', by E. C. Bayley, 20 June 1876, NAI, Foreign/Political A/February 1876/149–15.

⁵³ Captain Macdonald, Political Agent, Zhob, to Agent to Governor-General in Baluchistan, 30 November 1900, in a file regarding a 'Regulation to make better provision for the suppression of murderous outrages in certain frontier tracts', NAI, Foreign/Frontier (A)/nos. 63-72/August 1901.

⁵⁴ Temple, *Oriental experience: a selection of essays and addresses delivered on various occasions* (London: John Murray, 1883), p. 320.

⁵⁵ Viceroy John Lawrence, 11 October 1866, NAI, Foreign/Judicial (A) Proceedings/March 1867, Nos. 12–14, 17.

⁵⁶ On the weaponization of culture and colonial techniques of 'savage warfare', see Keith Brown, "'All they understand is force": debating culture in operation Iraqi freedom', *American Anthropologist*, vol. 10, no. 4, December 2008, pp. 443–453; Hugh Guterson, 'The cultural turn in the war on terror', in *Anthropology and Global Counterinsurgency*, (ed.) John Kelly (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), pp. 279–296; Hugh Guterson, 'The US military's quest to weaponize culture', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 20 June 2008; Rand, 'From the Black Mountain to Waziristan'; and Kim A. Wagner, 'Savage warfare: violence and the rule of colonial difference in early British counterinsurgency', *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 8, Spring 2018, pp. 217–237. On 'colonial mimesis', see Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, colonialism, and the wild man: a study in terror and healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). Mukulika Banerjee argues that the British used cultural knowledge about Pukhtun society to wage psychological warfare against anti-colonial nationalists. Mukulika Banerjee, *The Pathan unarmed: opposition and memory in the North West Frontier* (London: James Currey, 2000).

⁵⁷ For a comparative perspective, see the Special Issue on 'Hostile Populations' in *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 43, no. 4, October 2015.

Muslim population occupied the frontier and fear of an Islamic threat played a role in shaping British attitudes in the region, particularly after 1857.⁵⁸ The discursive positioning of the tribes in anterior time was central to the argument that modern methods of discipline and punishment were ‘a garment that did not fit’.⁵⁹ A ‘population whose ethics are those of the dark ages’⁶⁰ were deemed by the colonial rulers to require special measures.⁶¹ Thus, at around the same time as the Government of India was establishing a uniform code of laws for its modern political order in British India, it instituted a parallel system of law suitable to ‘the wants of a barbarous frontier’.⁶²

I first came across the case of Ajab Khan Afridi while conducting research about one of these special frontier laws: the Punjab Murderous Outrages Act of 1867 (MOA).⁶³ The MOA applied to ‘fanatics’ who murdered or attempted to murder ‘servants of the Queen and other

⁵⁸ Julia Stephens traces the workings of an imagined threat of Muslim conspiracy in India post 1857 in ‘The phantom Wahhabi: liberalism and the Muslim fanatic in mid-Victorian India’, *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 47, no. 1, January 2013, pp. 22–52. An alternative view is expressed in Chandra Mallampalli, *A Muslim conspiracy in British India: politics and paranoia in the early nineteenth-century Deccan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

⁵⁹ Caroe, *The Pathans*, p. 353.

⁶⁰ Official Report of Legislative Assembly Debates, 21 and 22 September 1921, vol. II, no. 7, Political and Secret (Departmental Papers), 1912–30, IOR, L/PS/11/202.

⁶¹ Taking a cue from the work of Giorgio Agamben, there is a developed scholarly literature on the colonial ‘state of exception’. See, for example, Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer: sovereign power and bare life* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1998); Giorgio Agamben, *State of exception*, (trans.) Kevin Attel, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Mark Condos, ‘“Fanaticism” and the politics of resistance along the North-West Frontier of British India’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 58, no. 3, July 2016, pp. 717–745; Nasser Hussain, *The jurisprudence of emergency: colonialism and the rule of law* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2003); Kolsky, ‘The colonial rule of law’; and Mark Rifkin, ‘The frontier as (movable) space of exception’, *Settler Colonial Studies*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2014, pp. 176–180.

⁶² James Fitzjames Stephen’s keepwith dated 23 February 1871 in NAI, Foreign/Political (A)/March 1871/21–25. See Elizabeth Kolsky, ‘Codification and the rule of colonial difference: criminal procedure in British India’, *Law and History Review*, vol. 23, no. 3, Fall 2005, pp. 631–683.

⁶³ See Mark Condos, ‘License to kill: the Murderous Outrages Act and the rule of law in colonial India, 1867–1925’, *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 50, no. 2, March 2016, pp. 479–517; and Kolsky, ‘The colonial rule of law’. The other ‘special’ law was the Frontier Crimes Regulation (1872). See Benjamin D. Hopkins, ‘The Frontier Crimes Regulation and frontier governmentality’, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 74, no. 2, May 2015, pp. 369–389.

persons in the frontier districts'.⁶⁴ Local authorities could summarily try and execute so-called 'fanatics' in unrecorded proceedings in which the accused had no right to legal representation or appeal. After conviction and execution, the body and property of the fanatic could be disposed of as the state saw fit. The most common method was to burn the corpse. Two days after Molly Ellis was abducted, the undersecretary of state for India informed members of parliament that, while vigorous measures were being taken to secure Molly's release, such 'outrages' could not be entirely prevented because: 'The barren hills are the home of fanaticism and of fierce revenge. The village mullahs excite the young men with the promise of a great reward to be gained hereafter by the killing of an infidel and the youths go off in a state of frenzy seeking a victim.'⁶⁵ By rhetorically framing the incident in fanatical terms, the state had issued itself a 'license to kill'.⁶⁶

Frontier masculinity and imperial insecurity

On the basis of rumours that the kidnappers had taken Molly to Tirah, a mountainous region in the semi-independent tribal tracts just south of the Khyber Pass (see [Figure 1](#)), Chief Commissioner Maffey assembled a search-and-rescue team. The team included his Indian personal assistant, the Assistant Political Agent in Kurram (Khan Bahadur Kuli Khan), and an English medical missionary named Lillian Starr. By sending Starr, who spoke Pashto among other languages, Maffey intended to extend a soft hand of power in lieu of a military expedition that might have threatened Molly's safety. As *The Times* correspondent reported from Peshawar:

The universal longing to strike a blow in retribution for this foul outrage is held in check by the recognition that rescue is the immediate and essential aim, and that nothing should be done to prejudice it. Once this has been achieved there is every reason to expect prompt punitive action.⁶⁷

The involvement of a British woman in a critical mission at the hyper-masculine edge of empire is a noteworthy feature of the story that we will return to later in this article.

⁶⁴ Kolsky, 'The colonial rule of law'.

⁶⁵ Lord Winterton quoted in *The Times*, 17 April 1923, p. 15.

⁶⁶ Condos, 'License to kill'.

⁶⁷ 'The kidnapping of Miss Ellis: efforts for her release', *The Times*, 20 April 1923, p. 14.

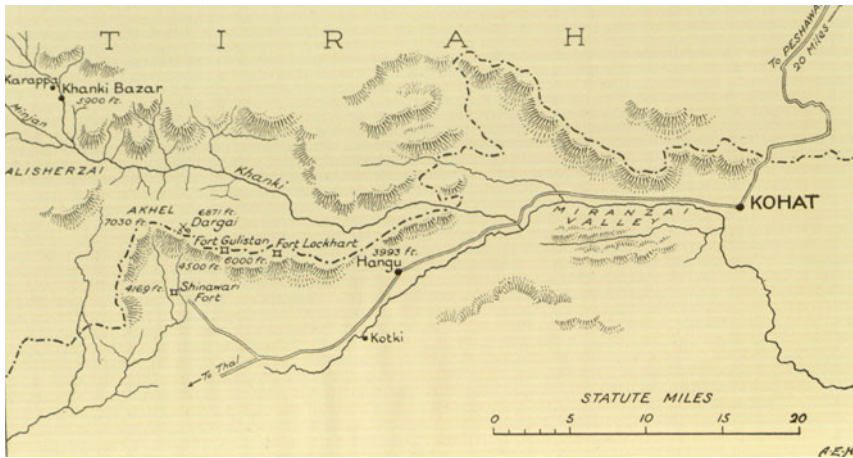


Figure 1. This line map shows the route from Kohat (where Molly was kidnapped) to Khanki Bazar (where she was rescued). It was published in Lilian Starr's account above the caption, 'Map of the Rescue Adventure'.

There were certain known facts about the 'Kohat gang' that were causing the prefabricated narrative of frontier fanaticism to fall apart even as it was being stitched together. A 'murderous outrage' supposedly involved an irrational and religiously motivated actor whose blind devotion to faith caused him to murder without provocation. However, British officials were aware that Ajab Khan was at least partly motivated by rational and strategic reasons that were connected to a 'chain of tribal events'.⁶⁸ As such, history and politics could not be entirely leached out of the explanatory framework for understanding the incident.

The first event in this chain involved a prior attack on the Kohat Cantonment on 15 November 1920, when 44 armed tribesmen entered and ransacked the bungalow of Lieutenant Colonel T. N. Foulkes of the Indian Medical Service. In addition to stealing property worth Rs 5,000, they shot and killed Colonel Foulkes and attempted to abduct his wife.⁶⁹ When the men realized that Mrs Foulkes was mortally wounded, they released her. (Mrs Foulkes died three weeks later.) An English woman had never been murdered on the frontier before and authorities collectively held the Tirah Jowaki Afridis responsible for the crime,

⁶⁸ Denys Bray, *Official Report of the Legislative Assembly Debates* (Delhi: Government of India, 9 July 1923), p. 4383.

⁶⁹ NAI, Foreign and Political/File No. 68-F/1923.

imposing heavy fines and a blockade on certain villages in the neighbourhood of Kohat. Nine months later, one of the suspects was arrested and executed under the provisions of the MOA. The others remained at large.⁷⁰ Collection of the Rs 12,000 fine had been scheduled for 16 April 1923 and some officials theorized that the invasion of the Ellis's bungalow was staged by Ajab Khan to 'get the Afridis *badnamed* and thereby stop any settlement'.⁷¹ (The Foulkes case was finally closed on 24 May 1923, when the Afridis paid the fine in full. A large portion of the fine was sent to the Foulkes's daughter as *diyat* or 'blood money'.⁷²)

A second link in the 'chain of tribal events' involved a theft of rifles. On 14 February 1923, 46 Enfield rifles were stolen from the Kohat police lines. Thefts of rifles and other firearms from frontier cantonments were a constant problem and speak to the importance of weapons both to the colonial state and to the local people over whom it sought to exercise control. The expansion of the British empire resulted in a massive infusion of modern firearms in the region.⁷³ Arms made their way into the hands of local people from raids on colonial arsenals, from a Persian Gulf arms trade, and from the official practice of paying allowances in guns. A major Government of India enquiry conducted in early 1922 concluded that the arming of the transborder tribesmen had 'left the British exposed like sheep to wolves'.⁷⁴

On 4 March 1923, Frontier Constabulary commander E. C. Handyside led a 'counter-raid' on Ajab Khan's village in Bosti Khel valley to recover the stolen rifles.⁷⁵ There, Handyside found 33 rifles from an underground cellar and stolen property that he claimed 'established in the clearest manner the complicity of Ajab Khan in the murder of Col. and Mrs.

⁷⁰ Rs 15,000 of the Rs 19,000 fine recovered from Tirah Jowakis was given to Foulkes's daughter.

⁷¹ Quoted from Colonel Bruce's report dated Kohat, 19 April 1923, in IOR, L/PS/10/1062, emphasis. See also Maffey's Telegram No. 154-L. dated (and received) 15 April 1923, in the same file.

⁷² See 'Principle regarding the payment of blood money to heirs of Government officials murdered on frontier discussed in relation to claim for blood money by Finnis' heirs', NAI, Foreign and Political/File No. 265-F/1924.

⁷³ Arnold Keppel, *Gun-running and the Indian North-West Frontier* (London: Murray, 1911). See also the *Report of the North West Frontier Arms Trade (Tucker) Committee*, IOR, L/PS/7/114.

⁷⁴ *Report of the North West Frontier Enquiry (Bray) Committee*, IOR, V/26/247/2, p. 3.

⁷⁵ Incidentally, Handyside was shot dead in Peshawar three years later on 11 April 1923. A memorial gate erected in his honour at the Kohat Pass has a plaque commemorating his 'many daring encounters with tribal raiders and outlaws'.

Foulkes'.⁷⁶ During the 'counter-raid', the *burqas* of Ajab's female relatives were allegedly removed, violating their *pardah*. According to Maffey, '[Ajab's] mother reproached him and he swore to her on the Koran to commit such a crime as had never been committed before. The story is true and among the many factors at work is not the least important'.⁷⁷ Colonial officials reasoned that Ajab and his men had kidnapped Molly Ellis to avenge the honour of 'their women'.⁷⁸

In the British empire, the idea of the frontier signified a racial line dividing civilization from savagery.⁷⁹ It was also a gendered construct. Literary scholars and historians of masculinity argue that a discourse of manliness developed 'at home' in Victorian Britain emphasizing the virtues of integrity, endurance, and hard work was enacted abroad in the empire.⁸⁰ Colonial frontiers provided a site for 'extreme feats of masculine bravado'⁸¹ and the performance of 'muscular virtues' such as courage, perseverance, and physical prowess. In his famous 1907 lecture on 'Frontiers', India's former Viceroy Lord Curzon described India's North-West Frontier as 'the most important and the most delicately poised in the world'. He admiringly detailed the 'types of manhood thrown up by Frontier life, savage, chivalrous, desperate, adventurous, alluring', lauding the many manly qualities cultivated in Britons who served on colonial frontiers, including 'courage and conciliation', 'patience and tact', 'initiative and self-restraint', and 'a powerful physique'. Curzon characterized the frontier as a 'nursery of character' where 'the moral fibre of our race' could be strengthened against the decaying influence of

⁷⁶ *Reports on the Administration of the Border of the NWFP*, 1922–23, 5–6, IOR, V/10/390.

⁷⁷ Maffey's Telegram No. 71-X. dated (and received) 21 April 1923, IOR, L/PS/10/1062.

⁷⁸ Maffey's Telegram P., No. 342-P. dated (and received) 18 April 1923, IOR, L/PS/10/1062.

⁷⁹ Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds describe the 'racial frontier' in *Drawing the global colour line: white men's countries and the international challenge of racial equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). For a comparative perspective, see Alen Lester, "'Otherness" and the frontiers of empire: the Eastern Cape Colony, 1806–c. 1850', *Journal of Historical Geography*, vol. 24, no. 1, January 1998, pp. 2–19.

⁸⁰ See R. Hogg, *Men and manliness on the frontier: Queensland and British Columbia in mid-nineteenth century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). J. A. Mangan emphasizes the cultivation of martial masculinity and the figure of the self-sacrificing imperial warrior in his essay, 'Duty unto death: English masculinity and militarism in the age of the new imperialism', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1995, pp. 10–38.

⁸¹ Schwarz, *The white man's world*, p. 115.

modern civilization and British masculinity could be reinvigorated 'in the furnace of responsibility and on the anvil of self-reliance'.

Curzon described the frontier as a source of 'chronic anxiety'⁸² to the Government of India and waxed poetic about 'the manly spirit and the courage of the border tribesmen',⁸³ who had long evoked both fear and respect in the minds of colonial administrators.⁸⁴ Civil servant Denzil Ibbetson captured the Briton's love-hate relationship with tribal masculinity when he observed that:

The true Pathan is perhaps the most barbaric of all the races with which we are brought into contact in the Punjab He is bloodthirsty, cruel and vindictive in the highest degree For centuries he has been, on our frontier at least, subject to no man. He leads a wild, free, active life in the ruggedness of his mountains; and there is an air of masculine independence about him, which is refreshing in a country like India.⁸⁵

The figure of the 'fine, manly and courageous'⁸⁶ frontier tribesman stood in stark contrast to the soft and 'effeminate Bengali' derided by colonial officials since the eighteenth century.⁸⁷ The fact that these 'wild and lawless, but brave and manly'⁸⁸ men inhabited a strategically important

⁸² Curzon's budget speech of 27 March 1901 printed in T. Raleigh (ed.), *Lord Curzon in India, 1898–1905* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1906), p. 416.

⁸³ Curzon's speech at the Quetta Durbar on 12 April 1900 in George Nathaniel Curzon, *Lord Curzon in India: being a selection from his speeches as viceroy and governor-general of India 1898–1905* (London: Macmillan and Company, Limited, 1906), p. 411.

⁸⁴ Recent historical scholarship has emphasized official anxiety and insecurity in British India, particularly after 1857. See Mark Condos, *The insecurity state: Punjab and the making of colonial power in British India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Harald Fischer-Tiné (ed.), *Anxieties, fear and panic in colonial settings: empires on the verge of a nervous breakdown* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Richard N. Price, 'The psychology of colonial violence', in *Violence, colonialism and empire in the modern world*, (eds) P. Dwyer and A. Nettelbeck (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 25–52; and Kim A. Wagner, "'Treading upon fires": the "Mutiny"-motif and colonial anxieties in British India', *Past & Present*, vol. 218, no. 1, February 2013, pp. 159–197.

⁸⁵ D. C. J. Ibbetson, *Report on the census of Punjab, 1881*, vol. 1 (Calcutta: Government of India, 1883).

⁸⁶ George Roos-Keppel to Lord Hardinge, 20 December 1915, in Roos-Keppel's Private Papers, IOR, L/PS/11/299.

⁸⁷ See Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial masculinity: the 'manly Englishman' and the 'effeminate Bengali' in the late nineteenth century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995); and Heather Streets, *Martial races: the military, race and Masculinity in British imperial culture, 1857–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

⁸⁸ Lord Roberts's speech in the House of Lords, dated 7 March 1898, reprinted in Richard Isaac Bruce, *The forward policy and its results* (New York and Bombay: Longmans, Green & Co., 1900), p. 326.

frontier was a source of both consternation and comfort. On the one hand, fiercely independent and manly men do not readily submit to orders from other men. On the other hand, such men were ideally positioned to guard the region from foreign invasion: 'India has cause indeed to be thankful that it has a race as manly and as staunch as the Pathan that holds the ramparts for her on this historically vulnerable frontier.'⁸⁹

The Kohat border was a site of continuous struggle. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to provide a detailed history of colonial interventions in the region, it is important to frame the kidnapping of Molly Ellis within the longer history of efforts to establish colonial dominance on the frontier and the geopolitics of the particular conjuncture of events in and around April 1923 when the kidnapping occurred. Shortly after annexation in March 1849, the Afridis signed a written agreement with the British promising to protect the Peshawar-Kohat Road in exchange for an annual allowance. When several Afridis attacked and killed members of a group of colonial surveyors dispatched to the region, the British launched the first of several punitive expeditions in February 1850. The Afridis signed a new agreement with the British after the Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878–80), accepting an annual allowance in return for protection of the Khyber and a promise not to engage in political relations with the Amir of Afghanistan.

The demarcation of the Durand Line in 1893 aimed to create a firm Indo-Afghan border, establishing formal spheres of influence and the expansion of railways, roads, and the movement of troops to advance colonial military and strategic interests in the transborder tracts. Efforts to control a border that arbitrarily divided people made the British, as one scholar puts it, 'almost irrationally anxious'.⁹⁰ After local tribesmen killed or wounded all British military officers in Tochi in June 1897, people along the frontier (including the Afridis) rose up in arms against an expanding colonial regime. General William Lockhart led an unprecedented military attack on the Afridis with an army of 40,000 troops during the legendary 'Tirah Campaign'. In 1898, the Afridis entered into a new agreement with colonial authorities, pledging no objection to the government's construction of railways or roads through the Khyber Pass. A few years later, the government considered (but

⁸⁹ *Report of the Frontier Regulations Enquiry Committee and Minutes of Dissent by Mr. T. Rangachariar and Mr. N.M. Samarth* (Delhi: Government of India, 1923).

⁹⁰ Banerjee, *The Pathan unarmed*, p. 42.

decided against) a proposal to forcefully extend British political control over an Afridi tract at the Kohat border, reasoning that to do so would require 'holding down, in the most difficult of countries, some of the fiercest, most treacherous, and most fanatical people in the world'.⁹¹ As the Khyber Pass grew in strategic importance, the Afridis became even more critical to frontier-security policy. In 1915, NWFP Chief Commissioner George Roos-Keppel called the Afridis 'the keystone of the frontier arch'.⁹²

Beginning in 1901, colonial officials began to observe a steady annual increase in crime in the settled districts.⁹³ In 1919, a sharp escalation in the incidence of serious crimes was attributed to a variety of explanatory factors, including 'the general disregard for human life in the minds of many who had fought in the Great War'; the scarcity and high prices that were a legacy of the war; the exponential increase of arms in the region; and the ease with which criminals and outlaws could jump the internal boundary and find asylum in the tribal tracts and across the Durand Line in Afghanistan.⁹⁴ An ongoing source of tension between the Government of India and the Amir of Afghanistan was the problem of frontier crime—raids, robberies, murders, kidnappings for ransom—and the difficulty of arresting perpetrators who escaped through the tribal tracts into Afghanistan.

The Third Anglo-Afghan War, though short, led to a marked increase in tribal resistance and what colonial officials generically called 'lawlessness'. India's Foreign Secretary Denys Bray referred to the 'orgy of kidnapping'⁹⁵ of mostly Hindu subjects that ultimately led to military operations against Waziristan, beginning in late 1919 and lasting for

⁹¹ Denzil Ibbetson keepwith dated 16 July 1904, NAI, Foreign/Secret (F)/August 1904/83–87.

⁹² Dispatch from George Roos-Keppel to Secretary, Government of India, dated 29 January 1915, Political and Secret (Departmental Papers), 1902–31, in Roos-Keppel Private Papers, IOR, L/PS/11/299.

⁹³ Comparable details are not available for the pre-1901 period before the formation of the new province. See Maffey's dispatch to Secretary to GOI, Foreign and Political Department, 12 March 1921, in *Report on the administration of criminal justice in the NWFP during the year 1920* (Peshawar: G. Press, 1921).

⁹⁴ See *Report on the administration of criminal justice in the NWFP during the year 1919* (Peshawar: G. Press, 1920). See also 'Annexure C: some important causes of increase of crime', in the Government of India, *Report of the North West Frontier Enquiry Committee and Minutes of Dissent by T. Rangachariar and N.M. Samarth*, NAI, Foreign and Political/1923/File No. 34-F.

⁹⁵ Denys Bray in response to Dr Nand Lal's query as to whether the government had taken action 'in cases in which Indian girls and Indian women were kidnapped or

four years. Punitive expeditions and aerial bombings were met with fierce opposition and armed attacks, a number of which were aimed specifically at colonial personnel (including the murder of the Foulkeses in November 1920). A few weeks before Molly Ellis was kidnapped, Majors N. C. Orr and F. Anderson of the 2nd Seaforth Highlanders were shot dead while walking along the Mullagori Road in Landi Kotal in Khyber.⁹⁶ One of the officers was wearing a white solar *topi* (hat), the quintessential sartorial symbol of colonial power. The murderers were later seen wearing the *topi*, which the British likely interpreted as a triumphant display of a successful headhunting expedition.⁹⁷ This combination of factors had the Kohat border in what one official called a ‘disturbed state’.⁹⁸ John Maffey described the region as being in a ‘state of siege’.⁹⁹ It was within this atmosphere of violence, fear, insecurity, and alarm that British officers and their families were practically confined to the cantonments.

A heroine’s tale of maternal imperialism

During the long journey into tribal territory, Molly walked, rode a donkey, and was carried on the backs of the men who had kidnapped her and killed her mother. Leaving the cantonment, the group moved west, criss-crossing the hills and riverbeds, travelling mostly at night and laying low during the day. Wearing her nightgown, a coat, shawl, and the leather-soled socks that the men gave her, Molly could see cars, troops, and cavalry passing along the Peshawar-Kohat Road—an artery marked by a history of colonial conflict. They travelled 80 miles over six days, arriving at dawn in what Molly later described as a ‘lovely valley’ with quaint villages, pine trees, and wild flowers. This was

abducted’, printed in ‘Extract from Official Report of the Legislative Assembly Debates’, 9 July 1923, pp. 4383–4387, IOR, L/PS/10/1062.

⁹⁶ The murder had far-reaching repercussions on Britain’s relations with Afghanistan, as the alleged murderers escaped to Afghanistan. See IOR, L/PS/10/1062 and NAI, Foreign and Political/File No. 517-F/1923.

⁹⁷ Dispatch from H. C. Finnis, Khyber Political Agent, 10 April 1923, NAI, Foreign and Political/1923/517-F. See David Vumlallian Zou, ‘Raiding the dreaded past: representations of headhunting and human sacrifice in north-east India’, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2005, pp. 75–105.

⁹⁸ A. M. S. Elsmie’s remarks dated 1 January 1924 in File 12, ‘N.W. Frontier Raids, Defence of Frontier Stations, Safety of European Ladies’, IOR, L/PS/10/1064.

⁹⁹ Maffey quoted in Samarth’s ‘Minute of Dissent’, p. 121.

Khanki Bazar. From there, Molly was taken six miles farther to the house of Sultan Mir, where a group of women lay her on a charpoy and massaged her from head to toe before feeding her boiled eggs and *chapati* (bread). For the next three days, according to Molly, 'they used to spend most of the day staring at me through the open door of a smaller, inner room on which there was an armed guard all the time'.¹⁰⁰

Lilian Starr, a nurse at the Peshawar Mission Hospital, nervously tended to her patients in the days following Molly's abduction: 'As we looked first at one patient, then another, into facts, some strong and manly, some coarse and even brutal, we would say to one another: "Think of *her* in the hands of *that* one—or that".'¹⁰¹ On 19 April, a letter arrived from Sir John Maffey summoning her to the Government House. When she arrived, Maffey expressed his concern that sending a military force would cause the group to harm Molly or to take her farther into tribal territory. He asked her 'to go simply as a trained nurse, to get to her if possible, and to stay with her wherever she was until she could be rescued'. Mrs Starr noted that '[h]e warned me of the risks, but I was naturally most anxious to go'.¹⁰²

On 20 April, Mrs Starr departed with Maffey in a motorcade. She had packed Afridi dresses for herself and Molly, as well as medical equipment, biscuits, chocolates, tinned food, a camera, and 25 gold sovereigns that Maffey gave her to use in case of emergency. She kept a diary of her journey, which formed the basis for her published account entitled 'An Errand of Mercy: The Search for Miss Ellis among the Afridi'.¹⁰³ In the account, Starr describes the search-and-rescue mission from multiple perspectives—hers, Kuli Khan's, and Molly's. Her narrative provides a rich and detailed description of the landscape, the architecture, the plant and animal life, and the people she encountered along the way. The text is filled with many familiar colonial stereotypes about a culture-bound people stuck in what literary theorist Anne McClintock calls 'anachronistic space'.¹⁰⁴ She describes the tribes 'living today in the customs and habits of some six hundred years back'¹⁰⁵ as

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in Schofield, *Every rock, every hill*, pp. 135–136.

¹⁰¹ Lilian Starr, *Tales of Tirah and Lesser Tibet* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1924), p. 167, emphasis in original.

¹⁰² Mrs Starr's first-hand account was published in *The Pioneer* on 23 April 1923.

¹⁰³ The story is published as part of her longer book, *Tales of Tirah*.

¹⁰⁴ Anne McClintock, *Imperial leather: race, gender, and sexuality in the colonial contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

¹⁰⁵ Starr, *Tales of Tirah*, p. 183.

fierce and lawless, wild and masterless, yet in their reckless fashion they are brave—true highlanders with an inborn love of fighting, and a pluck and hardiness one cannot but admire ... treacherous and cruel, capable sometimes of strong affection, often of a deep hatred, and an unrivalled tenacity in holding to his highest ideal, which is revenge.¹⁰⁶

At the administrative border, Starr left Maffey behind and proceeded by horseback into semi-independent tribal territory with his Indian personal assistant Khan Bahadur Risaldar Moghal Baz Khan (an Afridi) and a *jirga* of 40 tribesmen on foot. Mrs Starr's was the first peaceful visit of a Briton to Tirah since Lockhart's brutal military campaign in 1897. 'They only come fighting,' one man told her along the way.¹⁰⁷ As they travelled through each distinct tribal territory, one *jirga* would pass the group on to the next, 'the men running alongside our horses to conduct us through their area and to hand us over to the next'.¹⁰⁸ At the Risaldar's insistence, Mrs Starr covered her khaki solar topi with a white *pagri* (turban) and cloaked her khaki riding kit in the typical Afridi woman's black-and-red-bordered black chaddar to disguise her identity as an 'English sahib'. This, he reasoned, would protect her from snipers (see [Figure 2](#)).

Khan Bahadur Kuli Khan reached Khanki Bazar before Mrs Starr did. On 21 April, he met with Ajab Khan, his brother Shahzada, and Mullah Mahmud Akhundzada, a local religious figure, to negotiate terms for Molly's release. The following day, as punitive forces advanced—'Our houses are burned. Our women are killed,' Shahzada lamented¹⁰⁹—Ajab and his men agreed to let Molly go in exchange for the promise of their freedom, the release of two Bosti Khel Afridis imprisoned for theft in the Kohat jail, and a pledge that no future punitive fines or action would be taken as retribution.¹¹⁰ Mullah Akhundzada was promised payment of Rs 15,000 for 'expenses' incurred, although great pains were later taken by colonial officials to ensure that this payment was not seen as a ransom.

When Mrs Starr first met Molly in Khanki Bazar, she was 'lying on a charpoy looking white and played out, though physically absolutely uninjured and scarcely even bruised'.¹¹¹ On the morning of 23 April, the

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 227–228.

¹¹⁰ See 'Extract from Official Report of the Council of State Debates', 9 July 1923, pp. 4383–4387, IOR, L/PS/10/1062.

¹¹¹ Mrs Starr in *The Pioneer* on 23 April 1923.



Figure 2. This photograph of the successful search-and-rescue mission was taken in Khanki Bazar before the group returned to British territory on 22 April 1923. Lilian Starr stands in the rear, her head covered by an Afridi chaddar. Molly Ellis is seated at front wrapped in a similar chaddar brought by Mrs Starr from Peshawar. *Source:* © British Library Board (Photo 627/76).

two women travelled 30 miles back to the Shinawari Fort in British territory, where they were reunited with Maffey and Molly's father, Major Ellis (see [Figure 3](#)). In addition to a variety of written narratives, there is a compelling visual archive documenting this event. A series of 25 'Photographs taken by Mrs. Starr in Tirah' were printed by a government press in Peshawar. Many of these photographs appear in Mrs Starr's published account and in contemporary newspaper reports. The full series (and more) were preserved by the viceroy's wife, Lady Hardinge, some loose in boxes and others glued into a scrapbook with descriptive captions.¹¹² Unfortunately, we do not know more about the conditions under which the photographs were taken, printed, and circulated.

The English-language stories and newspaper reporting about Molly Ellis's kidnapping and rescue reflect the generic structure of an imperial adventure narrative: a perilous journey presented a series of obstacles

¹¹² Lord Hardinge of Penhurst Collection, Photo 592/5.



Figure 3. This photograph was taken on 23 April 1923, the day Molly returned from tribal territory to Shinawari Fort. Recovered and re-Anglicized, she is dressed in Mrs Starr's white sun hat and stands next to Moghul Baz Khan, a hybrid figure in a necktie, turban, and overcoat. Lilian Starr, back in British territory, is also dressed in British clothes, donning a khaki solar topi and riding kit as she clutches a notebook to her chest. At the far right, Chief Commissioner Sir John Maffey and Major Ellis (smoking a cigarette) oversee the group as symbolic white fathers in solar topis. *Source:* © British Library Board (Photo 627/76).

that culminated in a decisive face-off between the hero and *his* enemy.¹¹³ In tales of imperial adventure, the typical hero was a man.¹¹⁴ Lilian Starr's involvement in this particular imperial 'adventure' is somewhat unusual, as is the fact that she authored her own tale. Starr's account has all of the usual narrative elements found in an adventure tale: a quest, bad guys, a brooding mystic, and a fearless hero who sets off into the wild with derring-do and dutiful conviction.

The heroism that Lillian Starr demonstrated in Molly's rescue did not conform to the imperial ideal of a chivalric masculine adventure. Whereas

¹¹³ See Northrup Frye, *Anatomy of criticism: four essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

¹¹⁴ Graham Dawson, *Soldier heroes: British adventure, empire and the imagining of masculinities* (London: Routledge, 1994); Lee Horsley, *Fictions of power in English literature, 1900–1950* (London: Routledge, 1996); and Schwartz, *The white man's world*.

the iconic imperial hero was a 'lean and keen'¹¹⁵ man who used physical force to advance and defend imperial interests, Lilian Starr portrays herself as a compassionate and conciliatory character who connected with local people at every step of her dangerous journey. Displaying the masculine virtues of courage and self-sacrifice, she emerges from her own story as a peacemaker and bridge-builder who managed to win over even her staunchest sceptic, the Mullah Akhundzada. According to Starr, before leaving Khanki Bazar, she provided medical care to almost 30 people, including members of Mullah Akhundzada's family. As she and Molly rode past on horseback, women and children called out, 'Come again some day'.¹¹⁶

The life of Lilian Starr reveals how white women in the empire both conformed to and stretched normative gender roles and expectations. As historian Mary Procida once observed, '[t]he empire may have been masculine, but it was certainly not exclusively male'.¹¹⁷ Born in India, Lilian Starr worked alongside her husband, Dr Vernon Starr, at the Peshawar Mission Hospital. She vaccinated children; removed bullets from the shattered limbs of men, women, and children; and with 'gentle hands'¹¹⁸ provided care to the sick, the injured, and the sometimes mutilated bodies of those who fell victim to 'blood feud'. After a 'fanatic' stabbed her husband to death in their home in Peshawar, Mrs Starr worked as a military nurse in Cairo during the First World War, performing the feminine duty of tending to male soldiers in service to empire and nation. She returned to Peshawar in 1920 to serve in the city where her father had once worked.¹¹⁹

In a space where the display of British power was muscularly masculine and the emphasis on projecting overwhelming strength and dominance was unyielding, Lilian Starr's role as an agent of empire was cast in the tradition of maternal imperialism.¹²⁰ Mrs Starr, who had no children of

¹¹⁵ Sir Harcourt Butler, Foreign Secretary to the GOI, quoted in Coen, *The Indian political service*, p. 37.

¹¹⁶ Starr, *Tales of Tirah*, p. 239.

¹¹⁷ Mary Procida, *Married to the empire: gender, politics and imperialism in India: 1883–1947* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 6.

¹¹⁸ Starr, *Tales of Tirah*, p. 18.

¹¹⁹ Lilian Starr recounts her observations and experiences in *Frontier folk of the Afghan border and beyond* (London: Church Missionary Society, 1920) and *Tales of Tirah* (1924).

¹²⁰ The term 'maternal imperialism' was formulated by Barbara Ramusack in her essay, 'Cultural missionaries, maternal imperialists, feminist allies: British women activists in India, 1865–1945', *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 13, no. 4, pp. 309–321. See also Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of history: British feminists, Indian women, and imperial culture*,

her own, assumed the duty of maternal protector after Mrs Ellis died defending her daughter. She put her life on the line to achieve ‘the impossible’, valiantly retrieving Molly ‘unharmed’ from ‘the wilds of Tirah’.¹²¹ As Maffey observed: ‘With the charm of her fair face and a woman’s courage, she [Mrs Starr] made a mark on the heart of Tirah better than all the drums and tramlings of an army corps.’¹²² Contemporary newspaper accounts highlighted Starr’s heroic bravery and courage in the face of ‘hair-raising’ conditions.¹²³ Under the headline ‘Woman’s Heroic Mission’, *The Times* described ‘the element of romantic heroism [that] has been introduced into the rescue operations by Mrs. Starr ... the one woman who could do this’.¹²⁴ The Viceroy awarded Mrs Starr the Kaiser-i-Hind Medal for Public Service in recognition of her ‘heroic endeavor’ (see [Figure 4](#)).¹²⁵

As soon as Mrs Starr had fulfilled her soft role in the rescue mission, the hard hand of imperial retribution came crashing down, leaving much of the valley (as she herself put it) ‘in smoking ruins’.¹²⁶ Local lashkars entered the villages of Ajab Khan and Sultan Mir and destroyed their houses.¹²⁷ Maffey was eager to move quickly and exact vengeance: ‘We strike now while the iron is hot.’¹²⁸ It was Ramadan and he wanted to seize the strategic advantage: ‘There is no war spirit whatsoever in the tribes at present.’¹²⁹ On 8 May, the Royal Air Force flew 15 aeroplanes in formation over Khanki Bazar at such low altitude that onlookers could see the pilots’ faces. The air demonstration was choreographed to

1865–1915 (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Indrani Sen, *Gendered transactions: the white woman in colonial India, c. 1820–1930* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).

¹²¹ Starr, *Tales of Tirah*, pp. 11–12.

¹²² J. L. Maffey’s Foreword to Starr, *Tales of Tirah*, pp. 161–162.

¹²³ From her Obituary in *The Times*, 8 January 1977, p. 14.

¹²⁴ *The Times*, 23 April 1923, p. 12.

¹²⁵ Telegram from the Secretary of State for India to the Viceroy quoted in *The Times*, 28 April 1923, p. 9.

¹²⁶ Starr, *Tales of Tirah*, p. 172.

¹²⁷ ‘Summary of Events in North-West Frontier Tribal Territory, 1 January–31 December 1923’, in General Staff Branch NWF and Baluchistan Review of Events, 1922–32, IOR, L/PS/12/3170.

¹²⁸ Maffey’s Telegram P., No. 1360-R. dated (and received) 15 May 1923, IOR, L/PS/10/1062.

¹²⁹ Maffey’s Telegram P., No. 1262-R. dated (and received) 7 May 1923, IOR, L/PS/10/1062.



Figure 4. Lilian Starr wearing the Kaiser-i-Hind Medal for Public Service in India awarded to her by the viceroy in 1923.

frighten the tribes with the spectre of aerial bombing just days before Maffey's scheduled *jirga* with the Afridi and Orakzai tribes.

On 13 May, Maffey presented the tribes with an agreement that declared Ajab Khan and his accomplices as 'our own enemies'. The men were banished from the region and the tribes bound to arrest and surrender them to the government should they return. The agreement gave the government 'authority (by aeroplanes or otherwise) to take such action as may be suitable' if any members of the tribes gave 'passage or harborage' to them.¹³⁰ As Maffey noted in an official

¹³⁰ IOR, L/PS/10/1062.

telegram: ‘The *Jirga* was conducted throughout in a stern spirit with Tirah under immediate threat of reprisals and war. The proper atmosphere for very straight talking was thus produced.’¹³¹ As was often the case with punitive expeditions, the government used the kidnapping as an opportunity to expand the state’s material interests in the name of imperial security.¹³² At a second *jirga* held with the Kohat Pass Afridis on 21 May, an agreement was signed that permitted the construction of telegraph and telephone lines through the Kohat Pass from Peshawar to Kohat with intermediate telephone stations and the placement of frontier police posts to guard them.¹³³

The others’ side of the story

In a series of letters written—or at least inspired—by Ajab Khan, he defied official efforts to disappear him by telling his side of the story.¹³⁴ Ajab Khan’s written correspondence represented an act of resistance in a region where, after a century of British occupation, only 6 per cent of men and 1 per cent of women in the settled districts were literate (and even fewer in the tribal tracts).¹³⁵ Ajab Khan was one of the few ‘fanatics’ who was never captured, much less killed, by colonial authorities. Living to tell his tale gave Ajab epistolary agency and made it possible for other storylines to emerge, including his own.

¹³¹ The telegram dated 14 May 1923 is reprinted in ‘Extract from Official Report of the Legislative Assembly Debates’, 9 July 1923, pp. 4383–4387, IOR, L/PS/10/1062.

¹³² In a private email to the author, Mahabat Khan Bangash wrote: ‘Thick groves belonging to our family existed alongside the limits of the Kohat Cantonment. The bungalow from where Miss Molly Ellis was kidnapped stood third from these groves, which still exist. Through these thick orchards, Ajab Khan adopted the route that remained abandoned during the night time. Subsequently, after the incident in 1923, our family was deprived of this prime land and the groves by the British authorities, who acquired them to make the garrison safer.’ Email dated 26 April 2012. See also Rand, ‘From the Black Mountain to Waziristan’.

¹³³ *The Pioneer*, 26 May 1923.

¹³⁴ The letters were sent on his behalf by the Anjuman-i-Khuddam-i Kaaba (the society of servants of the Ka’aba), an organization founded in 1913 to protect Muslim holy sites from non-Muslim aggression. For an analysis of how this moment represented the ‘valorization’ of Ajab Khan, see Haroon, *Frontier of faith*, pp. 131–137.

¹³⁵ Jagannath Khosla, ‘Provincial autonomy in the N.W.F.P.’, *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 1, no. 3, January–March 1940, pp. 324–332.

Ajab's letters present a chronology and rationale for his actions that are similar but not identical to those outlined by colonial authorities. 'It is known to you,' he writes to Kuli Khan, 'that the quarrel and the case that I have against the British Government is a revengeful one.'¹³⁶ According to Ajab, his *badla* with the British government began in 1920 when 'the tyrannical officers of the frontier' implicated him 'without any proof' in a theft of 120 rifles from the Kohat Lancers and prohibited his entry into the settled districts: 'For two years I cried that my guilt should be proved.'¹³⁷ In 1922, he personally handed 'the Viceroy' a letter asserting his innocence, 'but the frontier officers paid no heed to this and began to worry me all the more. They auctioned my goats and [then] I took away 46 rifles from the Police Lines in retaliation'.¹³⁸ (Presumably, Ajab handed the letter to Foreign Secretary Denys Bray, who toured the tribal tracts in the spring of 1922 as head of the North West Frontier Enquiry Committee.) Ajab makes no mention in his letters of any involvement in the Foulkes's murder, just as colonial officials make no mention in their records of Ajab's implication in a 1920 rifle raid, his banishment from the settled districts, his encounter with Bray, or the seizure of his goats.

Ajab frames the kidnapping of Molly Ellis as a proportional act of *badla* (revenge) against a disproportional act of *zulm* (oppression). By his account, the murder of Mrs Ellis was unintentional. Expressing outrage at the 'cowardly night attack on our free country' (namely Handyside's counter-raid), he charges frontier authorities with 'exceed[ing] the limit of moderation', 'overaw[ing] the innocent women folk', and 'carr[ying] off a few of our Moslem brothers in custody'.¹³⁹ Ajab highlights the asymmetry between the honourable way in which he treated Molly 'like a respectable guest' and the dishonourable way in which the colonial government abrogated the 'solemn promise and written agreement' offered in exchange for her release.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ Translation of a letter without date from Ajab Khan to K. B. Mohammad Kuli Khan, A.P.A. Kurram, IOR, L/PS/10/1049.

¹³⁷ Letter No. 3 from Khuddam-i-Ka'ba of Yaghistan, to British Government of India, dated 20th Safar 1342 [2 October 1923], IOR, L/PS/10/1049.

¹³⁸ Letter No. 2 from The Anjuman-i-Khuddam-i-Ka'ba, Yaghistan, to The Kingdom of Great Britain, dated 20th Safar 1342 [2 October 1923], IOR, L/PS/10/1049.

¹³⁹ Translation of a letter without date from Ajab Khan to K. B. Mohammad Kuli Khan, A.P.A. Kurram, IOR, L/PS/10/1049.

¹⁴⁰ Letter No. 2 from The Anjuman-i-Khuddam-i-Ka'ba, Yaghistan, to The Kingdom of Great Britain, dated 20th Safar 1342 [2 October 1923], IOR, L/PS/10/1049. According to Sana Haroon, the Pashtun 'way of life' is governed by *Pashtunwali*, a pre-Islamic (and

The vernacular stories that circulate about Ajab Khan in Pakistan and Afghanistan take aim at the structural violence of empire and position Ajab as an avenger of the wrongs of the colonial system. A recurring feature in these accounts is the contrast between Ajab's protection of Molly's honour—there are clear sexual connotations in the repeated assertion that Molly was rescued with 'her honour intact'—and the disrespect shown by colonial officials during Handyside's counter-raid. Muhammad Ibrahim Athaee writes: 'Though Ajab Khan killed British soldiers, he kept the honor of Molly Ellis, the lady he kidnapped.'¹⁴¹ Ajab Khan is imagined not only as a brave Pashtun hero who stood up to British tyranny, but also as a valiant masculine hero and guardian of female virtue. Many film versions of the story emphasize a steamy, romantic plot line with Molly falling in love with Ajab and expressing her desire to stay in the mountains with him forever.¹⁴² The poster for Khalil Kaiser's 1961 hit *Ajab Khan* represents Molly as a bodacious Hollywood siren in a figure-hugging, low-cut red dress. She gazes up longingly at her captor, who holds her tightly to him with one arm as he clutches a rifle and steers a bucking bronco with the other (see [Figure 5](#)). The sexy imagery notwithstanding, the films (along with other Afghan narratives of the story) place great emphasis on the fact that Molly's 'honour' (virginity) was protected when she was in Ajab's custody.¹⁴³

The figure of the violated Pushtun woman is a repeated trope in the ballads and films that celebrate Ajab Khan's heroism. In the Pashto-language verse narrative published by Jamshed of Topi in 1964, Ajab's defence of his mother's honour is a prominent theme. Jamshed's narrator notes:

When Ajab Khan came home, he greeted his mother respectfully. His mother said, 'Keep out of my sight, you're a disgrace, may black earth be heaped

once unwritten) ethical code that upholds the protection of honour (particularly in cases involving women—*nang*) and the exacting of revenge (*badal*) as primary social principles. Haroon, *Frontier of faith*, pp. 131–137.

¹⁴¹ Muhammad Ibrahim Athaee, 'The story of the nation injured by self-inflicted pain and ravaged by time', *A Collection of Papers*. My thanks to my Pashto teacher Yaser Turi for the translation.

¹⁴² See the Pushto version starring Asif Khan, Yasmeen Khan, Hamayun Qureshi, and Saleem Nasir on youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B3II9I9HIVE>.

¹⁴³ See, for example, Muhammad Ali, 'Ajab Khan: amazing outlaw', in *And then the Pathan murders*, (ed.) Muhammad Ali (Peshawar: University Book Agency, 1966); Akbar Karkar, 'Ajab Khan as an ambassador of Pushtun Group and Pushtun Values', in *A collection of papers read at the gathering commemorating the anniversary of Ajabkhan Apridi* (Kabul: Khulsa Cultural Society, 1991).



Figure 5. This racy film poster for the Khalil Kaiser's 1961 Urdu-language film hit *Ajab Khan* sexualizes the incident even though most written vernacular accounts emphasize that Molly's 'honour' was not violated.

upon you! I can't hold up my head before our tribe and I sit reproached by high and low. The British took from us our honor and they vilely exposed the women. The tyrants unveiled our young girls and they took away the young men's rifles too. If in truth you are my son, you will openly take revenge on the British. If there's any cowardice in you, my son, I'll shed no tears about your death. I won't look upon your face in its shroud, and I won't allow your grave on our land either. Among Pathans, it's only when you bring forth brave offspring that ancestors' names are recalled with honor.' The women and girls surrounded Ajab Khan and they wept and told him the whole story. They said to him, 'There's been a great wrong done to us and there's no one to complain to except you. We long for revenge to be taken, for living with lowered eyes is very difficult.' His mother also cried, weeping and wailing and

her face was as red as a pomegranate flower with rage. O Jamshed, Ajab Khan was silent before them! Honor had set his body boiling.¹⁴⁴

In Jamshed's narrative, the kidnapping represented an assertion of Pushtun masculinity: 'He was a valiant Pashtun whose manliness was not doubted!' Jamshed represents Ajab Khan in explicitly gendered terms as a 'real man':

My friends, all the British are thorns in my eyes! I resent it when we are humiliated and when the Englishmen consider us as slaves. When Pashtuns salute the British, it is like falcons being servants to crows. Thinking about this to myself, it makes me weep, for lions have become obedient to jackals! Those Pashtuns who used to smash the enemy's teeth are now beneath the earth. But my heart is set on fighting with the British and I'll make the tyrants open up their eyes. I won't pass my life with eyes lowered, that's a promise! And I'll be remembered as a real man until the Resurrection.¹⁴⁵

In colloquial terms: real men resist the emasculation of empire.

In both the honour culture of the colonizer and that of his tribal nemesis, acts of gendered violence restored masculine authority. In Ajab's case, the attacks and raids that led to counter-raids and punitive expeditions were triggered by male aggression against women in intimate, domestic spaces. The assault on the women of Bosti Khel transpired in front of their village homes and involved a disrobing of sorts. The abduction of Molly Ellis and the murder of her mother occurred in the bedroom of their official household. Just as Ajab Khan decried the violation of his mother's *purdah*, the British condemned the laying of hands on 'their women' as the ultimate attack on what Commissioner Maffey called 'British life and honour'.¹⁴⁶

Conclusion

India's North-West Frontier was defined by successive generations of colonial officials as a primitive space populated by savage tribes who only understood the language of force. In 1924, the Government of India published specific guidelines for the 'Employment of Aircraft on

¹⁴⁴ Heston and Nasir, *The bazaar of the storytellers*.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ Maffey's Telegram P., No. 340-P. dated (and received) 16 April 1923, IOR, L/PS/10/1062.

the North-West Frontier of India'. The document opened with typical observations on the 'special' nature of 'The Frontier Problem':

The problem of controlling the tribal country on the North-West Frontier of India has always needed special treatment by reason of the psychology, social organization and mode of life of the tribesmen and the nature of the country they inhabit Hesitation or delay in dealing with uncivilized enemies are invariably interpreted as signs of weakness.¹⁴⁷

The sociological theory of masculine overcompensation helps to explain the colonial concern with displaying 'no signs of weakness' in a region where they were both terrified and terrifying.¹⁴⁸ Colonial violence on the frontier was not simply about protecting a vulnerable geopolitical space; it also aimed to assert white masculinity and fortify the race-gender hierarchy upon which the empire was built. Such violence was often embedded in local forms, including *barampta*, *bandish*, and *badla*. When John Maffey convened the Afridi *jirga* on 13 May, he told them: 'we had now cause for a *badla* (feud) with them of the worst type—the *badla* over a woman, which by their own custom must be paid in blood.'¹⁴⁹ The idea of a *badla* aimed at righting a particular wrong contradicted the colonial notion of a murderous outrage prompted by irrational religious fanaticism.¹⁵⁰

White women appeared in this space of security theatre to perform official comfort and confidence. Prior to Molly's abduction, precautionary measures had been taken to protect the wives of British officers on the frontier—restricting their movement, surrounding the cantonments with barbed wire, installing night guards, and prohibiting the entry of women and children in certain areas. However, the state was hesitant to adopt too much extra security lest it give an impression of fear, vulnerability, and effeminacy.¹⁵¹ A Permanent Standing Order prohibited officers from having guards stand directly over their

¹⁴⁷ 'Employment of aircraft on the North-West Frontier of India', in NAI, Foreign and Political/Frontier/1923/File No. 328 (II)-F.

¹⁴⁸ Bruce Schneier, *Beyond fear: thinking sensibly about security in an uncertain world* (New York: Springer, 2003).

¹⁴⁹ Starr, *Tales of Tirah*, p. 245.

¹⁵⁰ The British Minister to Kabul astutely noted that a murder could not be termed 'fanatical' if it was motivated by revenge. Frances Humphrys, British Minister to Kabul, to Government of India, 18 May 1923, L/PS/10/1062.

¹⁵¹ File 12, 'N.W. Frontier Raids, Defence of Frontier Stations, Safety of European Ladies', IOR, L/PS/10/1064.

bungalows, which is why Major Ellis had given his wife a whistle to blow in the event of an emergency.¹⁵²

Colonial ideas about frontier fanaticism were so durable that, even where rational political motivations were well known, as in Ajab Khan's case, high-level officials continued to insist that 'behind individual motives lies the spirit of fanaticism'.¹⁵³ In November 1923, another 'outrage' occurred in Parachinar, a small cantonment in the Kurram valley, just 35 miles north-west of Khanki Bazar. In the middle of the night, Captain Edward Watts and his wife Elsie were killed in their bungalow. No valuables were taken. No alarm was raised. Not even the dogs bugged. Although the perpetrators left no clues, authorities connected the incident to Ajab's 'Kohat gang'. Shortly after the murder, Mrs Ella Giles, Elsie Watts's mother, wrote a letter to the editors of the *Daily News*. Under the headline 'Murdered White Women', Mrs Giles inquired: 'Why does the Indian Government allow British women in these places? Greater precautions should have been taken at Parachinar where Captain and Mrs. Watts were murdered.... What has the Indian Government to say? The greatest insult a native can give a white man is to abduct his womenfolk.'¹⁵⁴ Members of parliament discussed the 'safety of European ladies' on the frontier and wondered whether the time had come for them to go.¹⁵⁵ One official warned that 'a panic measure of this description would be absolutely fatal to British prestige'.¹⁵⁶ In a secret dispatch to the Government of India, frontier authorities speculated about why the tribes had recently begun to target English women:

One theory to which publicity has been given, and for which the authority of local knowledge is claimed, is that the frequent use of aeroplanes for what amounts to police rather than military work, and the resultant indiscriminate bombing of men, women, and children in tribal country, is responsible for the adoption by the tribesmen of what is in their eyes a policy of retaliation.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵² Reference to former NWFP Chief Commissioner George Roos-Keppel's permanent standing order in IOR, L/PS/10/1064, File 10.

¹⁵³ Denys Bray's remarks dated 23 April 1923 in 'Policy in Waziristan, Waziristan Series, Part IV', NAI, Foreign and Political/1923/412-F.

¹⁵⁴ *Daily Express*, 12 December 23, in L/PS/10/1064.

¹⁵⁵ File 12, 'N.W. Frontier Raids, Defence of Frontier Stations, Safety of European Ladies', IOR, L/PS/10/1064.

¹⁵⁶ A. M. S. Elsmie's remarks dated 1 January 1924 in File 12, 'N.W. Frontier Raids, Defence of Frontier Stations, Safety of European Ladies', IOR, L/PS/10/1064.

¹⁵⁷ Extract from Secret Despatch No. 3 to GOI, 9 August 1923, IOR, L/PS/10/1064. Lord Peel, the Secretary of State for India, flatly denied this theory. Session of 3 May 1923, quoted in *The Times*, 4 May 1923, p. 7.

The abduction and murder of British women were thus interpreted as an indigenous version of the 'punitive expedition'—a quick and spectacular method of sending a strong message to punish a perceived wrong.

Ajab's case caused an acute crisis in British diplomatic relations with Afghanistan where he and his brother were rumoured to have taken refuge. British authorities insisted that 'in accordance with the usage of civilized nations',¹⁵⁸ the men should be denied harbourage. However, their demand had little traction because the Government of India and the Amir of Afghanistan did not have a mutual extradition treaty. The anomalous legal status of the tribal tracts made a reciprocal agreement for the exchange of criminals impossible, as colonial authorities had no legal jurisdiction over people beyond their internal administrative boundary. In December 1923, British women were withdrawn from the legation in Kabul in a diplomatic move intended (unsuccessfully) to pressure the Afghans to turn over Ajab and his brother.

The colonial government persevered for a decade in a relentless pursuit of Ajab Khan and the 'Kohat gang'. Of the four members, only one was captured. Gul Akbar was arrested in Peshawar City on 9 May 1927 and hanged two days later.¹⁵⁹ Ajab Khan and his brother Shahzada both escaped to Afghanistan. Shahzada died in Mazar-i-Sharif in 1958. Ajab died there several years later. Sultan Mir's fate remains unknown. Although the case was officially closed in March 1983, following Molly Ellis's trip to Kohat to visit the gravesite of her mother, memories of the incident endure.

¹⁵⁸ Humphrys to Muhammad Wali Khan, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Kabul, 14 December 1923, File P. 1685/13, IOR, L/PS/10/1065.

¹⁵⁹ 'Summary of Events in North-West Frontier Tribal Territory, 1 January–31 December 1927', in General Staff Branch NWF and Baluchistan Review of Events, 1922–32, IOR, L/PS/12/3170.