

ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



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Episode #071

The Great Game

14 July, 2020

[00:00:00] Hello, hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:00:11] The show where you can listen to fascinating stories, and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:22] I'm Alastair Budge and today we are going to be talking about The Great Game.

[00:00:29] It's the story of a battle for power in Central Asia between Great Britain and Russia, a story of spies, [deception](#)¹, and a [proxy-war](#)² fought by young men in the 19th century.

¹ tricking someone, hiding the truth

² a war fought between smaller groups on behalf of larger groups

The Great Game

[00:00:45] I read an amazing book about this, probably 10 years ago, and it has been on my list of episodes to make for quite some time. So I'm thrilled to be sharing it with you today.

[00:00:59] It's quite a [niche](#)³ topic, but it is a fascinating story, so let's get right into it.

[00:01:09] The Great Game is a tale of high adventure.

[00:01:12] Of [spymanship](#)⁴, and of what we can call '[derring-do](#)⁵', of great courage and bravery.

[00:01:21] It is the story of young adventurers, British and Russian, who [grappled](#)⁶ for power and influence in central Asia in the 19th century.

[00:01:33] It's the sort of thing that sounds almost completely invented, something you might read about in an adventure novel, but it is actually true.

[00:01:45] Or at least, most of it is - at the end of the episode we'll talk about some of the debate about how true it actually is.

[00:01:55] So let's set the scene.

[00:01:58] We are at the start of the 19th century, in the early 1800s.

³ very specific and only interesting to a small group of people

⁴ relating to spying

⁵ bravery and courage

⁶ fought, contested

The Great Game

[00:02:04] The British Empire stretched over almost every corner of the world.

[00:02:09] And the jewel in its crown, the most [prestigious⁷](#) colony, was India.

[00:02:16] Russia, on the other hand, had been building up its own empire, which stretched from the Arctic Circle down to the Black Sea, and from the Baltic Sea right across to Alaska, occupying large parts of countries we now know as the Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Georgia, and Uzbekistan.

[00:02:40] Great Britain is, of course, a long way away from India.

[00:02:45] Russia is a lot closer, and there was this huge fear that Russia was making moves towards India, planning to move further and further south, in order to launch an attack and [seize⁸](#) India, to take it from the British.

[00:03:03] Between the southern border of the Russian Empire, and the north-western part of British India, stood a wide [expanse⁹](#) of central Asia governed by various different central Asian rulers.

[00:03:18] The area of land we're talking about here is mainly modern day Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

⁷ important and admired

⁸ take by force

⁹ a large open stretch of land

The Great Game

[00:03:28] This area was large enough that the edges of the Russian empire and the British empire were still thousands of kilometres away from one another, but there was a constant threat, and there was the constant fear that the Russians would come south, and from the Russian side, there was the fear that the British would advance north.

[00:03:53] So, this led to a series of the most amazing diplomatic missions, over the course of almost 70 years.

[00:04:01] Because The Great Game isn't an official term, and it's not an actual war in itself, historians disagree over when it actually started and ended, but most agree that it started in 1830, and ended in either 1895 or 1907.

[00:04:25] The idea, both for Britain and Russia, was to create a series of '[buffer](#)¹⁰ states', countries that were friendly towards either Britain or Russia, between their two empires.

[00:04:41] This was long-term, strategic diplomacy. The idea was to build [allegiances](#)¹¹, and not just to march in there with an army.

[00:04:51] Well, at least that was the plan.

[00:04:54] In 1830, the governor general of India, Britain's top man in India, was given the task of establishing a trade route between British India and Bukhara, a trade centre

¹⁰ something that protects another thing from something else

¹¹ loyalties and beliefs (especially to a country or leader)

The Great Game

in modern-day Uzbekistan, and the center of the Emirate of Bukhara, a powerful Uzbek state.

[00:05:15] The idea was that this trade route would allow Britain to get a [foothold¹²](#) in the region and build relations with the local powers.

[00:05:26] This would be advantageous for Britain because it could trade with the local powers, but it also had the added bonus that it would mean that having an ally in the region would lead to protection in the case of Russia making advances southwards, towards India.

[00:05:46] There were some problems with this approach though.

[00:05:50] Firstly, the states that the British wanted to negotiate with weren't states, in the European sense, with [demarcated¹³](#) borders and clear rules of law.

[00:06:02] They had fluid borders, and had no intention of adapting to this European idea of clear, [demarcated](#) borderlines.

[00:06:13] Secondly, the geography of large parts of the region made it very hard to travel through.

[00:06:21] Not only was it very mountainous, but it was also deadly hot in the summer, and bitterly cold in the winter.

¹² a position from which you can make progress

¹³ signalled clearly

The Great Game

[00:06:31] And linguistically, the differing people of the region spoke different languages.

[00:06:36] Very few spoke any English, so any foreigner would need to know the local languages and dialects.

[00:06:44] And finally, foreigners, especially white Christians, as the British explorers were at that time, were often not welcomed [with open arms](#)¹⁴ by the majority-Muslim population.

[00:07:00] So, I've set the scene, but what actually happened?

[00:07:05] Well, over the period of almost 70 years, there was a sort of cold war, as young British and Russian spies traveled through the area, often in complete disguise, trying to gather intelligence about the geography, the people, and also trying to strike deals with the local leaders.

[00:07:28] It was really the first time that a war was fought in this way, through young spies, without any direct conflict between the two opposing sides.

[00:07:41] This was quite strange, as historically the way that battles had been fought was pretty simple - the different parties would [line up](#)¹⁵ opposite each other in a field, and fight until enough people on one side were killed and the other one gave up.

¹⁴ in a friendly and welcoming way

¹⁵ stand in a line

The Great Game

[00:08:01] This new strategy of spying, of playing the long game, and of individuals adventuring deep into unknown territory was pretty [novel](#)¹⁶.

[00:08:14] So it was a fascinating time, and the golden age of the young adventurer.

[00:08:21] There are lots of different stories that we could talk about from The Great Game, but my favourite involves a Scotsman called Alexander Burnes.

[00:08:33] He joined the army when he was just 16 years old, and was sent to India to be a soldier in the British East India Company's Army.

[00:08:45] He had a talent for languages, and learned Urdu and Persian fluently.

[00:08:51] He became very interested in Afghanistan and central Asia, and he longed for the chance to explore it properly.

[00:09:00] It was the wild west, to the Brits. From its geography to its culture, very little was known about it.

[00:09:09] And if Britain was to establish good relations, and a trade route, then they would need someone to go and explore it, and come back to [base](#)¹⁷ with information.

[00:09:22] Burnes was the obvious choice, and in 1831, when he was only 26 years old, he was sent north, up into the [wilderness](#)¹⁸ of Afghanistan.

¹⁶ new and interesting

¹⁷ the main place from where an army or organisation controls their activities

¹⁸ unknown territory

The Great Game

[00:09:36] He traveled in full [disguise](#)¹⁹, wearing traditional clothing, and growing his facial hair like the local people.

[00:09:45] He managed to travel all the way from Kabul to Bukhara, almost 1000km, and then back again.

[00:09:54] He returned with a huge amount of intelligence about the local geography, customs and leaders, which was incredibly valuable to the British, who [prior](#)²⁰ to this, knew almost nothing about it.

[00:10:10] Armed with this intelligence from Burnes, the British tried to strike trade agreements with some of the local leaders, but were [rebuffed](#)²¹, they were turned away.

[00:10:23] Six years after his [initial](#)²² trip, Burnes was sent back to Afghanistan to try to strike a deal with the Emir, the leader of the country, a man called Dost Mohammed.

[00:10:37] The proposal to Dost Mohammed was that the British would protect him in exchange for his [obedience](#)²³.

¹⁹ something you wear to change your appearance and make yourself look like someone else

²⁰ before

²¹ refused to accept

²² first

²³ doing what you are told

The Great Game

[00:10:45] However, he was [having none of it](#)²⁴, Dost Mohammed was not interested, and instead of accepting the British proposal, he started speaking to the Russians to see what they could offer him instead.

[00:11:00] This was too much for the British, and it [startled](#)²⁵ the leaders back in Delhi.

[00:11:07] They got scared.

[00:11:08] So, with diplomacy having failed, or at least not led to the intended results, the British opted for the tried and tested method: force.

[00:11:22] They invaded Afghanistan in 1839, removed Dost Mohammed, and replaced him with a [puppet](#)²⁶ ruler, a man called Shah Shuja ul-Mulk.

[00:11:34] Now Shah Shuja had previously been the ruler of Afghanistan, but had been kicked out of power and had been living in [exile](#)²⁷ in India.

[00:11:46] He was ready to do anything to [regain](#)²⁸ power, including being [sympathetic](#)²⁹ to the British.

²⁴ not accepting it

²⁵ surprised and alarmed

²⁶ a person who is controlled by someone else

²⁷ sent away from your own country

²⁸ take possession of again

²⁹ understanding and caring of

The Great Game

[00:11:54] However, he was [loathed](#)³⁰, he was despised by the Afghan people. He sounds like just a horrible man - one of his main hobbies was removing the ears, eyes, nose, and testicles of his servants, and he apparently took great pleasure in public executions.

[00:12:17] He was incredibly unpopular, and the British, despite thinking that they could just put him on the throne and be done with it, then realised that they had to keep a large number of soldiers in the capital, Kabul, just to stop an [uprising](#)³¹.

[00:12:34] Burnes, our young officer, was [stationed](#)³² in Kabul to try to keep an eye on things and report back.

[00:12:43] But the British presence in Kabul was not well received by the local population, as you might imagine.

[00:12:52] Not only was it a military occupation, but it looked like the British were there for good - like they would be there for the long run.

[00:13:11] Senior officials took houses, and Kabul became the playground for young British officers.

³⁰ hated

³¹ when the people of a place rise up against those people in power

³² placed

The Great Game

[00:13:20] Of particular [offence](#)³³ to the local population was the fact that many of these officers [struck up](#)³⁴ relationships with the local women.

[00:13:37] Pre-marital relations were completely out of the question in Afghan culture, and the fact that these foreigners were openly having relationships with Afghan women was deeply offensive to the local male population.

[00:13:40] However, against the well-organised and well-equipped British troops, there wasn't a huge amount that the Afghans could do.

[00:13:50] Afghanistan didn't have an army. Instead, the local chiefs would keep some soldiers, and when the king needed an army, he would [enlist](#)³⁵ the chiefs to [round up](#)³⁶ their soldiers and they would all come together.

[00:14:06] It was nothing like the British army, but at least it was something.

[00:14:13] After three years of British occupation, the Afghans had had enough. Angry [mobs](#)³⁷ formed, crowds of angry people, and they marched on the houses of British officers.

³³ behaviour that makes someone angry or upset

³⁴ started

³⁵ to join the armed forces

³⁶ bring together

³⁷ large groups of crowds, especially violent ones

The Great Game

[00:14:27] One of the first targets was Alexander Burnes.

[00:14:33] Now, Burnes had shown great skills at diplomacy and persuasion, but this skill also proved to be his [downfall](#)³⁸. The same skills of persuasion resulted in numerous local lovers, and it was an open secret that he had been sleeping with local Afghan women.

[00:14:53] So it's hardly surprising that he was one of the first targets.

[00:15:00] As the [mob stormed](#)³⁹ his [compound](#)⁴⁰, he ordered his guards not to fire their weapons, instead, trying to negotiate with the [mob](#) in Pashto, the local language.

[00:15:13] His diplomatic skills and [charm](#)⁴¹ had served him well, and he was confident that he would be able to turn the situation around.

[00:15:23] However, this time, it wasn't to be. The [mob](#) was furious, they were [baying for blood](#)⁴².

³⁸ the end of a person or organisation

³⁹ taken by force

⁴⁰ a residential area surrounded by a wall, often used for the military

⁴¹ being easily able to attract others

⁴² wanting the death of someone

The Great Game

[00:15:31] When it was clear that the end was in sight, Burnes reportedly tied a [blindfold](#)⁴³ around his eyes and walked out to the mob, where he was beaten to death in an instant, and his head chopped off.

[00:15:50] After the death of Burnes, it was evident that it was going to be too dangerous for the British to stay in Kabul, and a retreat was planned.

[00:16:01] But it wasn't just a small [squadron](#)⁴⁴ of soldiers. There were around 16,000 people in this group, a quarter of whom were soldiers, but the rest were families, lovers, and servants.

[00:16:16] They thought that they could just retreat to Jalalabad, a city 80 miles, or 5 days walk away, where they would be joined and supported by reinforcements.

[00:16:29] Unfortunately for them, it wasn't to be.

[00:16:32] Almost all of them died, either frozen to death in the Afghan winter, or killed by the 30,000 Afghans who caught up with them. The lucky ones were taken prisoner and forced to marry their captors, but even that doesn't sound that lucky to me.

[00:16:54] Some historians say that the Great Game ended here, with the [humiliating](#)⁴⁵ retreat from Kabul, and then the devastation of the British troops afterwards.

⁴³ a piece of cloth that covers your eyes

⁴⁴ a group of soldiers

⁴⁵ embarrassing

The Great Game

[00:17:05] But for another 40 years or so, the British seemed obsessed with this idea that Russia was trying to move south, to [curry favour](#)⁴⁶ with local leaders, with the view of ultimately [mounting](#)⁴⁷ an attack on British India.

[00:17:24] This attack on British India never happened, and historians have debated whether there was actually any real threat from Russia, about whether the Russians really ever wanted to make a move for India.

[00:17:40] One theory is that this entire idea was pushed forward by British political [factions](#)⁴⁸, and [exacerbated](#)⁴⁹ by young Brits, people like Alexander Burnes, who longed for adventure.

[00:17:57] It's certainly clear that, if there ever was a game, The Russians played it better than the British.

[00:18:05] They didn't invade directly, they didn't attack, they just [bided their time](#)⁵⁰.

[00:18:10] And while the Great Game, in the Britain vs. Russia sense might be over, there's a strong argument that this was only just the start, the only difference is that now some new players have joined.

⁴⁶ become friendly with

⁴⁷ launching

⁴⁸ groups (normally within a larger groups), typically with different characteristics or views

⁴⁹ made worse

⁵⁰ waited

The Great Game

[00:18:28] Afghanistan has remained a country where political games have been fought long after Alexander Burnes was killed, and you could certainly say that the Great Game is still being played there today.

[00:18:43] And while 150 years ago the original Great Game might have been played in Afghanistan, these geopolitical games of chess are now being played all over the world.

[00:18:55] From China in Africa, to the United States in Latin America, countries have realised that power isn't won or lost overnight, and that they have to play the long game, the great game even, in order to succeed.

[00:19:15] Ok then, that is it for today's episode.

[00:19:19] I have [glossed over⁵¹](#) quite a lot of the details, and only picked a few highlights, but I hope it has [whetted your appetite⁵²](#) to find out more.

[00:19:29] If you are feeling particularly curious, the book I mentioned at the start is called The Great Game: The Struggle for Empire in Central Asia, and it's by a man called Peter Hopkirk.

[00:19:41] It is 500 pages long, and not the easiest read if you are not a native speaker, but it is fascinating.

⁵¹ to avoid talking about

⁵² makes you want to do something again (or in greater detail)

English Learning for Curious Minds | Episode #071
The Great Game

[00:19:50] As always, I would love to know what you thought of the show. You can email
hi - hi @leonardoenglish.com.

[00:19:58] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo
English.

[00:20:04] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF PODCAST]

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Deception	tricking someone, hiding the truth
Proxy-war	a war fought between smaller groups on behalf of larger groups
Niche	very specific and only interesting to a small group of people
Spymanship	relating to spying
Derring-do	bravery and courage
Grappled	fought, contested
Prestigious	important and admired
Seize	take by force
Expanse	a large open stretch of land
Buffer	something that protects another thing from something else
Allegiances	loyalties and beliefs (especially to a country or leader)
Foothold	a position from which you can make progress
Demarcated	signalled clearly

The Great Game

With open arms	in a friendly and welcoming way
Line up	stand in a line
Novel	new and interesting
Base	the main place from where an army or organisation controls their activities
Wilderness	unknown territory
Disguise	something you wear to change your appearance and make yourself look like someone else
Prior	before
Rebuffed	refused to accept
Initial	first
Obedience	doing what you are told
Having none of it	not accepting it
Startled	surprised and alarmed
Puppet	a person who is controlled by someone else
Exile	sent away from your own country

The Great Game

Regain	take possession of again
Sympathetic	understanding and caring of
Loathed	hated
Uprising	when the people of a place rise up against those people in power
Stationed	placed
Offence	behaviour that makes someone angry or upset
Struck up	started
Enlist	to join the armed forces
Round up	bring together
Mobs	large groups of crowds, especially violent ones
Downfall	the end of a person or organisation
Stormed	taken by force
Compound	a residential area surrounded by a wall, often used for the military
Charm	being easily able to attract others
Baying for blood	wanting the death of someone

The Great Game

Blindfold	a piece of cloth that covers your eyes
Squadron	a group of soldiers
Humiliating	embarrassing
Curry favour	become friendly with
Mounting	launching
Factions	groups (normally within a larger groups), typically with different characteristics or views
Exacerbated	made worse
Bided their time	waited
Glossed over	to avoid talking about
Whetted your appetite	makes you want to do something again (or in greater detail)

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What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

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