AFGHANISTAN—THE END OF A BUFFER STATE?

The British occupation of Iraq, Syria, and Iran during the last few months was in every case preceded by the claim that dangerous German intrigues were being carried on in those territories. Quite recently such reproaches were also directed against Afghanistan. Does this mean that Afghanistan's part as a buffer state has been played out?

Throughout the last few decades modern Afghanistan has been the typical example of a buffer state. It owed its existence to its strategic position which straddles the only road (Shiba Pass—Kabul—Khyber Pass) between the systems of the Amu Daria and the Indus rivers—between Russia and British India. It was given its role of a buffer during the nineteenth century when Russian imperialism led the soldiers of the Tsar deep into Central Asia, and that old bugbear of England's—an attack on India from the north—came very much to life. There was on several occasions at that time a serious possibility of an armed clash between the two great powers. However, the Russian advance gradually came to a standstill and was replaced by an activation of Russian foreign policy in other directions, towards Europe and the Far East. Nevertheless England made sure of the vulnerable North-West Frontier of India by the creation of the buffer state of Afghanistan. The advantage of Afghanistan as a buffer against Russia outweighed its nuisance as a base and refuge for anti-British tribesmen such as the Fakir of Ipi.

Afghanistan, the Great Divide of rivers and peoples, seems to have been especially chosen by nature for this purpose. The mighty ranges of the Hindu Kush and Koh-i-Baba are almost entirely impassable. In the course of thousands of years, wave upon wave of migrating peoples swept from all sides against this barrier without ever completely surmounting it. This is the origin of Afghanistan's manifold population.

Four river systems carry the waters of the Koh-i-Baba away to all points of the compass: to the north flows the Amu Daria into Lake Aral, to the northwest the Murgh-ab into the deserts of Kara Kum, to the southwest the Hilmend into the marshlands of Seistan, and to the east the Kabul river to the Indian Ocean.

The road-network of Afghanistan gives a clear picture of its geographical and political position. The main road runs in a wide circle through the Shiba Pass and round the central massif of the Afghan mountains. From this ring radial roads branch off into the neighboring countries — northwards into Russia, westwards into Iran, and on the extended southeastern border into British India.

Nothing indicates more clearly the buffer nature of Afghanistan than its railway connections with the outside world. Four railroads, two Russian and two British, lead right up to the very border barriers of Afghanistan. But England and Russia have watched with jealous and suspicious eyes to see that the railroads of the opposing side did not move into Afghan territory by so much as a foot.

The rivalry between Great Britain and Russia, to which Afghanistan owes its existence as a buffer state, although it continues to exist fundamentally has been temporarily suspended today by the alliance of these two powers. For the duration of this suspension the

position of Afghanistan has, therefore, undergone a radical change. A buffer state created by two powers as means of defense against each other has suddenly turned into a country through which both allies would be able to co-operate economically and militarily. An occupation of southern Russia in Europe by German troops would render the road through the Khyber and Shiba Passes the most important means of communication between the British Empire and the USSR.

Afghanistan is following this trend with great anxiety. During the last few years the country has been busy with modernizing and inwardly strengthening the state by building up its systems of education and administration. The occupation by British and Soviet troops would bring this development to an abrupt end.