Britain formally recognised Afghanistan as an independent state only in November 1921, just three weeks before the Anglo-Irish Treaty did the same for Ireland. Both those settlements resulted in uncontrollable borders, unresolved territorial issues, divided communities, and complex political, economic and geostrategic relationships.

Arising from research for my book *Spying on Ireland: British Intelligence and Irish Neutrality during the Second World War* (Oxford, 2008), I have developed a deep interest in Britain’s political and strategic relationship with her other awkward small neighbour, independent Afghanistan, between 1921 and 1947. There is no accessible Afghan foreign policy archive, but British records include decoded Afghan diplomatic communications, and those of other powers dealing with Afghanistan, and these provide a unique insight into how Kabul saw the world and sought to protect Afghanistan’s interests in the 1930s and 1940s in the face of not one difficult neighbour, but four: China, Persia, British India, and the dreaded Godless Soviet Union. The records also show how Afghanistan’s engagement with wider Muslim issues across Central Asia and the Near and Middle East, from Palestine to China, was qualified by consideration of her relations with her powerful, feared and demanding neighbours the Soviet Union and British India.

**Small states in the post-WWI international system: Afghanistan and Ireland**

This research aims to make a contribution not only to the neglected history of decades of sophisticated and successful Afghan management of external affairs, and to the British Empire’s difficulties in controlling its land borders, but to wider scholarship on the role of small weak states in the post-First World War international system of which Afghanistan and Ireland are interesting examples.

Finally, the study will cast more light on Irish contributions to British imperial governance: key officials dealing with Afghanistan such as Sir Francis Wylie and Sir Philip Vickery were Trinity graduates, and other Irishmen involved include Sir Aubrey Metcalfe and Brigadier Bill Magan (whom I interviewed in 2001).

My underlying argument is clear: for all the apparent chaos, under development, and weakness of central government in Afghanistan, for forty years the state proved remarkably successful in securing its external interests and in managing its difficult Soviet and British Indian frontiers. How this was achieved, and what it says about the complex nature of governance in Afghanistan, is of contemporary as well as historical interest.

I aim to produce a full monograph on this project in 2021. Significant publications to date include articles in Holocaust and Genocide Studies (2016) and Twentieth Century China (2017), and co-authored entries in the *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World Volume IV.*

Opposite is a dramatic illustration of how a decoded cable concerning Afghanistan could influence high policy: the consequence was a much-resented but successful Anglo-Soviet demarche which forced the Afghan government to expel Axis civilians in September 1941.

→ For all the apparent chaos, under development, and weakness of central government in Afghanistan, for forty years the state proved remarkably successful in securing its external interests...
Churchill's impulsive response to this raw intelligence is reflected in this memo to the Foreign Secretary. He rightly assumed that Kabul had been profoundly intimidated by the Anglo-Soviet invasion of neighbouring Persia the previous month.

Note Churchill's marginal marks in red ink on the last paragraph.
To read the full publication, please click here