

WORLD POLICY JOURNAL

The Hidden Roots of Wahhabism in British India

Charles Allen

Three generations ago a great deal was known about Muslim extremism in India, and with good cause—indeed, one of my great-grandfathers was standing beside the viceroy when he was knifed to death by an alleged Wahhabi assassin in 1871. But by my grandfathers' time that experience was fast being forgotten, and by my father's generation it had been buried in the archives. Had this present generation been more aware of the true history of Indian Wahhabism, our governments might perhaps have been more wary of engaging in war by proxy following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. And if we are ever to come to terms with why so many young men have given and continue to give their lives to jihad in what the British knew as the North-West Frontier, and why so many cling to the belief that this same region is a dar-ul-Islam or "domain of the faith" second only to Mecca and Medina, then we have to understand what Wahhabism accomplished there, not only in the 1980s and 1990s but a full century and a half earlier.

Charles Allen is a historian of the British colonial period in South Asia. His recent publications include Soldier Sahibs: The Men Who Made the North-West Frontier and The Buddha and the Sahibs: The British Discovery of Buddhism. He recently received the Sir Percy Sykes Memorial Medal for his work in "stimulating public interest in Britain's imperial encounter with Asia." His history of Wahhabism will be published in Britain later this year.