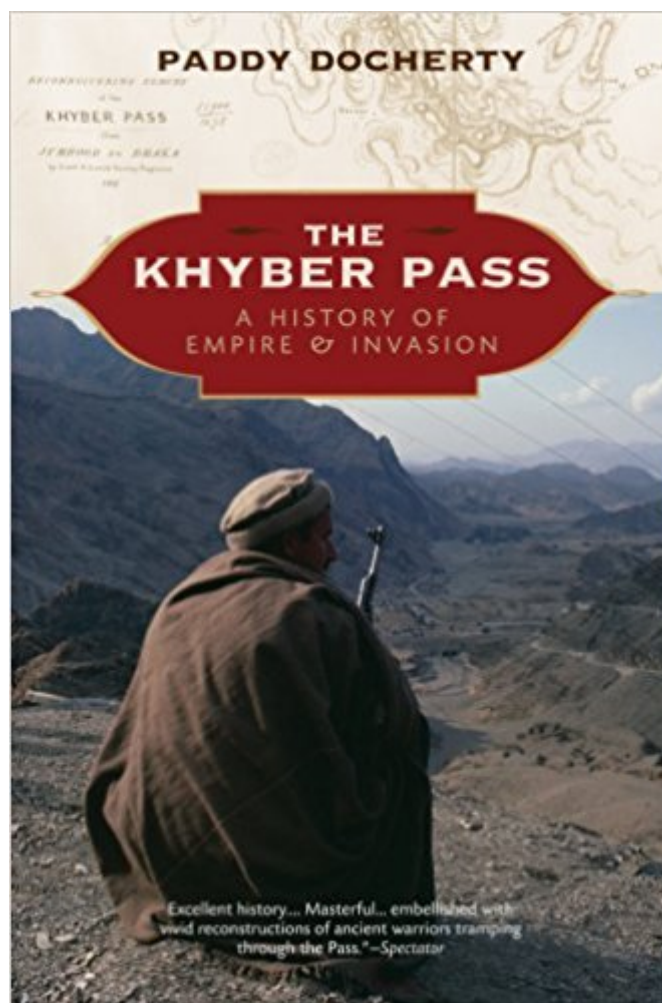


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# The Khyber Pass: A History Of Empire & Invasion



## Synopsis

Thirty miles long, and in places no more than sixteen meters wide, the Pass is the principal route through the great mountain borderlands between India and Central Asia — and the path of invasion for generations of conquerors. In this ground-breaking book, Paddy Docherty charts its remarkable story — one which involves so many of the world's great leaders and civilizations, from the influential Persian kings to Alexander the Great, from the White Huns to Genghis Khan, not to mention the Ancient Greeks and countless tribes of nomads and barbarians. He paints an illuminating picture of mountain warriors and religious visionaries, artists, poets and scientists as well as describing how around the Pass emerged three of the great world religions — Buddhism, Sikhism and Islam. He also depicts the Pass' more modern significance as a lawless region of gunsmiths, drug markets and as a terrorist hideout. Just a few years after the Soviet Union was defeated by the Afghan Mujahideen, many thousands of soldiers from the United States, Britain and other nations are struggling to control Afghanistan. Through his own travels in this true frontier region Paddy Docherty brings this epic history into the twenty-first century. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

What you will think about this book depends on what you are looking for. If you want a perspective of 2500 years, you will enjoy this. However if you are looking for some substantial information about the Khyber Pass from the time of the British, you will be disappointed. The author covers the British presence in about 30 pages and spends more than twice that amount on the time before Christ. The

book is well written and if it is covering events that are of interest, it is an easy read. But since I was looking to learn about the time of the British and how that evolved into the present I was disappointed.

I was very pleased, thank you!

Paddy Docherty's *The Khyber Pass* is a mixed bag. He occasionally employed bad grammar, something not expected from an Oxford graduate. He also used offensive terms derived from mediocre British academics. He insultingly employed "Hinayana" (Lesser Vehicle) when referring to Theravada Buddhism (elders' doctrine), the older Buddhist tradition of Sri Lanka, Thailand and Cambodia. Nevertheless, Docherty accomplished the task of providing a concise summary of the history of Eurasia and the Indian subcontinent from the Medo-Persian Empire to the present. Docherty wisely focused on the Khyber Pass as the thematic center of the military, religious, economic, political and social interactions between diverse and geographically divergent cultures. He explained how Samarkand in present day Uzbekistan was of crucial importance to India and how Macedonia influenced the art of Iran, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan and India. The Khyber Pass provides a short, foundational understanding of an area of the world about which most Occidentals, Americans in particular, are ignorant. Docherty ought to be lauded for this, his literary shortcomings notwithstanding.

National history was obsessed with frontiers: anything that happened beyond them was of no import, or a disturbance, or cause of war. Western historiography of this kind had a curious feel about it - as if each national history was in some way disjoined from that of its neighbors. Whole empires if not continents vanished beyond such a narrow horizon. Trade, cultures, and religion, of course, recognize no borders, so national history writing missed the waxing and waning of such forces as they moved about the Eurasian continent. Fortunately historians have moved on, taking sometimes a geographic point of view around which to structure their narrative. Braudel's view of the Mediterranean as the organizing feature for the history of western Eurasia was path breaking in this respect. The author's ambition is of the same kind, if not scope, or depth. He uses the Khyber Pass as the pivotal feature from which to describe the moves, mainly of kings and armies, from the steppes of Asia into the West, or then India, for over 2'000 years. With such a time-line, the tale is bound to be gripping and, for many readers, largely new. The narrative is crisp, clear, concise - and ever so British. There is a firm and synthetic grasp of the subject matter, a skill for the telling or racy

detail. For those who are not familiar with this rich history, the book is a good basic introduction. In line with the narrow focus on "kings and battles - as well as passages through the Pass" the story begins, abruptly, with the Persians, so VIth Century AD. This is regrettable, for the author misses the whole of the preceding history, in particular the founding "Aryan" period. It is in the north of the Khyber Pass that "great nomadism" emerged, together with the domestication of the horse, and the honing of metallurgic skills for the chariots (see *The Horse, the Wheel, and Language: How Bronze-Age Riders from the Eurasian Steppes Shaped the Modern World*). The Aryan language family differentiated, with Sanskrit and Prakrit moving somehow into India, together with the horse. The ensuing diffusion process - the myth of the Aryan invasion of India - would have been worth retelling for its impact on India. Alexander, the Maurians, the Kushans, and then the Sasanian Persians follow. This focus on (eventmental) political events misses the underlying long term economic and cultural features - the emergence and blossoming of the Silk Road, and its separation, in the Oxus plain, into two flows: one into India (and Arabia and the West beyond) and on straight on toward the Mediterranean. Conversely, religions travelled with monks and merchants all the way to Japan, and then even south into South East Asia. True, Buddhism is treated in the book, but not contextualized enough: the Khyber Pass' main role in history may have been less that of a passageway for armies than for trade and religion. For those that want to learn about the dynamics of people, the succinct description by Liu (*The Silk Road in World History* (New Oxford World History)) remains unrivalled. The author's attention now begins to falter, and the story wanders. The Khyber Pass does not justify a cameo description of the emergence of the Islamic world all the way to the Atlantic. The tale of the Mongols has remaindered feel and does not reflect current understanding of the organic relationship that may have existed between nomadic groups and agricultural empires (see e.g. *Ancient China and its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History* or *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China 221 B.C. to AD 1757* (Studies in Social Discontinuity)). The Moguls' history is retold rather conventionally (the treatment of Akbar on pg. 176 is downright unworthy of the ruler) - if focused (not again!) on battles and successions. The emergence of the Sikh as a regional power south of the Pass is well sketched. Conventional - even lacrimose - is the British thrust in the XIXth century into Afghanistan. As for the dissolution of the British Empire, one smells a whiff of huntingtonian inevitability - ignoring i.a. the role many British actors (from the "politicals", to Churchill, to Mountbatten) had in the outcome, or the multicultural character of the Indian state. The unsettled state of the border between India and Afghanistan at the time of independence is ignored and the emergence of other players - so China - is not even mentioned. Personal history is now foregrounded - I'm not sure that this confessional tail

is worth reading. A war is currently being waged in and around the Khyber Pass. Though the mountain feature probably plays a subordinate logistic part in it, the region as a whole awaits a global role once the power relations are settled. A "new" Silk Road - oil and gas flowing east and south, merchandise flowing out of the two emerging economic powers China and India - may emerge. Such a look into the geostrategic future would have been a more fitting ending to the book than the tale of the author in chitrali hat being driven to Kabul and out to write the book safely absconded in the British Library. But here my own old-fashioned prejudice against an author hogging the limelight shows.

This is simply an AMAZING book and very well written. Do not let the title mislead you. This book is not just about a single geographic feature. The Khyber Pass was of strategic importance until the invention of the aircraft (and arguably still is today), and the book concisely and brilliantly describes the ebb and flow of various powers and civilizations throughout the entire Central and South Asia regions. From Cyrus the Great to the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, this book highlights history in such a way the reader is both captivated and enlightened. I consider myself a well versed student of Asia, yet I learned a lot of new things from "The Khyber Pass." Although the book is technically a history book, I would definitely describe it as a "page-turner," the book is that good. It has earned a permanent place on my library shelves.

This is a good history of a lawless frontier region that many will hear talk of but few will ever visit. The authors cover the entire history of the pass and surrounding region from the early persian experiences to modern times. The book will be of interest to people looking for information about Afghanistan, Pakistan and the history of how the region got to where it is today. The authors are well-informed and experienced with regard to the region. Its a good light read on a timely historical topic.

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