

What History Can Teach Us about Contemporary Afghanistan

By Thomas Barfield

Afghanistan has a deep history that shapes the perceptions of the people who live there. Just how deep that memory goes, even among people who are illiterate and informed only by oral tradition, is striking. In the mid-1970s, the nomads I was living with in northern Afghanistan roundly condemned the Mongol invasion of the country—in 1220—and the long-lasting destruction it caused. It was a shame, they complained, that I had not been able to visit their region before that time when its economy was in better shape. More recent historical events were also widely recalled.

Taliban propaganda portrays Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai as an American Shah Shuja, a cutting reference to the king the British brought to power in 1839 during the First Anglo-Afghan War. When British troops deployed to southern Afghanistan in 2006, residents feared they had been sent to take revenge for the Afghan victory at the Battle of Maiwand that took place there during the Second Anglo-Afghan War in 1880. In addition, plans for withdrawing the bulk of international forces from Afghanistan in 2014 immediately make Afghans recall the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 that began a slide to civil war. By contrast, the international appreciation of Afghan history is quite shallow. For many, it begins only in 2001, when the Taliban were removed from power by the US, or in 1979,

when the Soviet Union invaded the country. More than that, foreign perceptions of Afghanistan are too often based on beliefs that have little historical substance and distort Afghan realities. Teachers introducing Afghanistan to their students might therefore want to get beneath the surface of today's headlines.

1. Afghanistan's history transcends the boundaries of the current nation-state.

Afghanistan's history as a nation-state begins with its foundation by a Durani Pashtun-ruling dynasty in 1747, but the history of its component parts is much older and more complex. Before the mid-nineteenth century, it was more renowned as a highway of conquest than a graveyard of empires. Located in a strategic zone linking Iran in the west, Central Asia in the north, and South Asia in the east, the territory of today's Afghanistan was the historic route of choice for armies moving across the Hindu Kush (or south of it) toward the plains of India. As a result, its various regions were normally subsidiary parts of larger regional empires or constituted important frontiers of more powerful states, some of the the most important of which are listed in the table below.

Empires, States, and the Afghanistan Region

BCE

- 6th to 4th centuries** The Persian Empire
- 4th to 1st centuries** Alexander the Great and the Greeks

CE

- 1st to 3rd centuries** The Kushan Empire. The Kushans were beneficiaries of an international trade network that brought goods to them from both the Mediterranean in the west and China in the east to their territories in the area of present-day Afghanistan, Pakistan, and western India.
- 7th to 8th centuries** The Arabs
- 9th to 10th centuries** The Samanid Empire was a Sunni Persian state in Central Asia and Greater Iran.
- 11th to 12th centuries** The Ghaznavid and Ghorid dynasties. The Ghaznavids took power from the Samanids and founded a powerful empire with its capital in the Afghan city of Ghazni. The Ghorids controlled most of what is now Afghanistan, eastern Iran, and Pakistan.
- 13th to 14th centuries** Mongols
- 14th to 15th centuries** The Timurid Empire was founded by the militant conqueror Timur (Tamerlane) and included Iran, modern Afghanistan, and modern Central Asia, as well as large parts of contemporary Pakistan, Mesopotamia, Anatolia, and the Caucasus.
- 16th to 18th centuries** Mughal India and Safavid Iran



Two Persian soldiers in Persepolis. Source: <http://tiny.cc/1tp4gw>.



Alexander mosaic from the House of the Faun, Pompeii, c. 80 BCE. Source: <http://tiny.cc/upp4gw>.



Mongol soldiers using bow in Jami al-Tawarikh, by Rashid al-Din, 1305–1306. Source: <http://tiny.cc/m8p4gw>.



Maitreya and Kushans devotees, second-century Gandhara. Source: <http://tiny.cc/ehq4gw>.



Detail from a painting of the surrender of the Safavid Persian garrison of Qandahar in 1638 to the Mughal army of Shah Jahan, commanded by Kilij Khan. Source: <http://tiny.cc/uxp4gw>.

Thus, contrary to the image common in today's popular press of an unconquerable, xenophobic, and isolated Afghanistan, historically it was a hub of international networks of trade and culture with a wide variety of rulers, most of them of foreign origin. It was only during the Anglo-Afghan Wars in the nineteenth century that Afghan rulers began stressing more nationalist and Islamic historical themes as they sought to isolate the country politically and economically in order to preserve its independence from the British in India and the Russians in Central Asia.

A question for today's students to ask is, "What history will be more relevant to Afghanistan's future—examples drawn from an insular and bounded nation-state that successfully emerged in opposition to Western colonialism, or examples from its more cosmopolitan past where the country flourished by linking itself to the outside world?" In a world where rising regional economic powers such as China and India see Afghanistan as a source of rich mineral deposits and a possible center of a revived Asian overland trade network for moving goods and energy, Afghanistan's older history may provide a better predictor of its future than its more recent past.

2. Afghanistan's history has longer periods of peace than violence.

When asked about the possibility of bringing an end to war in Afghanistan in 2009, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper was pessimistic: "We are not going to ever defeat the insurgency. Afghanistan has probably had—my reading of Afghanistan history—it's probably had an insurgency forever, of some kind."¹ Indeed, for those who start their history of Afghanistan with the 1979 Soviet invasion, Afghanistan does appear to be plagued by continuous violence and incapable of governance. But these past three decades of disorder are a marked break with Afghanistan's far more peaceful past that was characteristic of its longer history. Three examples make this clear. The first is the existence of a dynastic ruling elite, first established by Ahmad Shah Durrani in 1747, which held continuous authority over Afghanistan for 230 years until the 1978 Communist coup. Although composed of rival and competing clans, such was the political prestige of this Durrani dynasty that nonroyal insurgent factions always found it easier to agree to return power to them rather than see it pass to another group. The desires of many Afghans to see the then eighty-six-year-old Zahir Shah restored to the throne after the Taliban was toppled in 2001 proved this old pattern was far from dead. The second example—contrary to common belief—is that before 1978, insurgencies were rare in Afghanistan and lasted only a couple of years or less on each occasion. Indeed, there were no insurgencies against any Afghan government before the British invaded Afghanistan in the nineteenth century because until then, struggles for state power were contests among rival elites that did not require (or appreciate) the participation of the rural population. When the rural population did take up arms for the first time against the British, their participation ceased soon after foreign troops departed. Third, the belief that Afghans are unable to live at peace with one another is refuted by the fifty years of stability that followed the end of a nine-month civil war in 1929. In those decades, despite the absence of strong government institutions, Afghans or foreigners alike could travel safely throughout the country, and violence was rare. A 1975 attempt by Islamic radicals to begin an insurgency against the Afghan government failed so miserably within days that its leaders had to flee to Pakistan. Many of these men would later become *mujahideen* (Muslim holy warriors engaged in a *jihad*) faction leaders in the Soviet War. However, their success then was because of external factors and not from any underlying domestic support.

But if Afghanistan was stable in the past, what makes it so difficult to restore a peaceful equilibrium now? History is not always about continuity, but about disruption as well, and the disruptions to Afghan politics, social organization, and life experience over the past thirty years have been significant. The destructive legacy of the Soviet invasion cannot be

The destructive legacy of the Soviet invasion cannot be underestimated. It lasted for a decade, led to the death of a million Afghans, and sent at least four million refugees fleeing to neighboring Pakistan and Iran.

underestimated. It lasted for a decade, led to the death of a million Afghans, and sent at least four million refugees fleeing to neighboring Pakistan and Iran. These large refugee movements added to the displaced internal populations that fled to Afghanistan's cities, upending existing mechanisms of social order and dispute resolution without providing good alternatives. The insurgency itself differed significantly from those against the British or internal Afghan civil wars. It was national and cross-ethnic, but so too was the Soviet-backed Kabul government it fought against. During this war, all factions depended on money and weapons supplied by foreign patrons with their own ideological agendas. The Soviets and Americans both saw Afghanistan as part of a broader Cold War struggle in which the intrinsic value of the country and its people was a secondary factor. Saudi Arabia, keen to project its own religious values on a larger Islamic stage, funded radical Sunni Salafists, while Iran supported Afghan Shiites. Pakistan saw the Afghan War as an opportunity to back factions willing to ally themselves with Islamabad in its regional competition with India. By the time the Soviets withdrew in 1989, the possibility of an internal Afghan peace settlement was too tied up in these international and regional rivalries to have much chance of success. The inconclusive civil war that ensued with the fall of the Communist regime in 1992 led to the rise of the Taliban in 1995.

The American invasion that toppled the Taliban so easily in 2001 ended the civil war period, and many millions of refugees returned to Afghanistan. What the invasion has failed to do over the past decade is to create a stable foundation to maintain the peace. Students looking at Afghan history need to examine both the periods of stability and the disruptions of the past thirty years to debate the reasons for this. Is it a question of a flawed political structure, corruption, foreign interference, lack of economic development, or internal domestic divisions? Support can be found for all these explanations—and others—but they are best approached by a more nuanced understanding of how Afghan politics has worked in the past and what models history offers for the future.

3. Foreigners first entering Afghanistan attempt to remake it in their own image but discover the virtues of doing things the Afghan way when they wish to leave.

Over the past 170 years, Afghanistan has experienced four direct interventions by Western powers: two Anglo-Afghan Wars (1839–42, 1878–80) in the nineteenth century, a Soviet occupation in the twentieth century (1979–89), and an American-led invasion in the twenty-first century (2001–present). The reasons each power chose to go into Afghanistan were quite different. The British saw Afghanistan as a bulwark for the defense of greater India against possible threats by an expanding Russia. By contrast, the Soviet Union intervened in Afghanistan in support of a failing client regime, fearful that it would appear weak if it did nothing to prevent the new revolutionary Afghan socialist government from collapsing. The US invaded Afghanistan to topple the Taliban because they had provided the bases for the al-Qaeda terrorists who mounted the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington. But, whatever the reasons they chose to enter Afghanistan, all followed strikingly similar policies once they got there.

In both Anglo-Afghan Wars and the Soviet invasion, London and Moscow presumed that a successful invasion alone would defeat the opposition, and they could set the terms on which a new government would operate.

regimes, in the short term they undermined the British position and helped lay the basis for the broad insurgency that drove them from Afghanistan in 1842. During the Second Anglo-Afghan War, the British stayed clear of direct domestic administration interference, but their long-term plan was to dismember and incorporate smaller parts of Afghanistan into the Indian Raj as they had already done with Baluchistan and the Northwest Frontier Province. A change of policy in London reversed that aim in 1880, when the decision was made to keep Afghanistan an independent buffer state running its own affairs.

The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979 to support the socialist regime there. It immediately restructured the Kabul government and security services to better resemble those they had used in other Soviet client states. Although the Russians reversed some of the more radical reforms fa-

vored by the Afghan Communists—and never attempted to introduce such Soviet institutions as collective farms—they nevertheless stood firmly behind an economy based on central planning and the primacy of a vanguard secular socialist party. They were also keen to make social reforms to ensure the rights of women, reduce the influence of the clergy, and expand secular education. Although the Afghan socialist regime enthusiastically backed these policies, such social issues had a contentious history in Afghanistan, and in 1929, the policies provoked a civil war that toppled the reforming King Amanullah. Like the British almost a century and half earlier, the Soviets also installed its representatives in all Afghan ministries to ensure that government officials carry out planned reforms and train a new army. In this, they were frustrated by the existence of two rival party factions, Khalq and Parcham, which would not be induced to cooperate with one another. None of these projects ever reached completion. Soviet military and civilian advisers were completely withdrawn from Afghanistan when the Russians left in February 1989, although the regime in Kabul continued to receive substantial aid from Moscow until the Soviet Union itself collapsed in 1991.

In both Anglo-Afghan wars and the Soviet invasion, London and Moscow presumed that a successful invasion alone would defeat the opposition, and they could set the terms on which a new government would operate. Any troops left behind after the invasions could expect only garrison duty. They were both ill-prepared for the insurgencies that arose later, and their home governments eventually decided to shift to policies of indirect support. Both British and Soviet policy changes followed the same trajectory. After their initial expectations of transforming Afghanistan's political structure and its people proved unrealistic, they became more open to letting the Afghans do things in their own way, and both redefined their benchmarks for success downward. Instead of seeking a total transformation of Afghanistan, they settled for finding an Afghan leader who could keep control of the country with only "over the horizon" assistance. These indirect policies proved surprisingly successful. Although none of the rulers brought to power by invading foreign armies could maintain stability in the country, those who came to power as foreign troops withdrew did. For example, Dost Mohammad, whom the British restored to the throne in 1843 after they had first deposed him in 1839, went on to rule Afghanistan for the next twenty years. Similarly, the Amir Abdur Rahman, who took power in the wake of the British withdrawal in 1880, succeeded



Photograph taken by John Burke in 1869; a studio portrait of the Amir of Afghanistan, Sher Ali (1825–1879), Prince Abdullah Jan, and Afghan *sirdars* (chiefs), from a series titled *Photographs of the Amir Shere Ali Khan and Suite*. Source: <http://tiny.cc/vn1pgw>.

After their initial victories in the first Anglo-Afghan War, the British made the modernization of the Afghan state a top priority. They reorganized its administrative and financial structure, making it more efficient and substantially increasing the amount of tax revenue it collected. They abolished the old feudal military system based on land grants and replaced it with a much smaller professional army trained by British officers. They also had plans to reform the judicial system by using professional, state-appointed judges to replace the existing corps of Muslim clerics, whom they deemed hopelessly corrupt. Because the British found Afghan officials—including the ruler they had installed—reluctant to carry out these changes, they appointed their own personnel to oversee the process within the Afghan government. Less intentionally, the British occupation of Kabul upset the old social order through its lavish spending in support of its troops and the massive infusion of currency. Afghans in Kabul complained that British contracts enriched the grain merchants who supplied them, starved the poor who could no longer afford the high prices, and made the chiefs living off fixed rents destitute. This made it easier for opponents to paint British administrative and economic changes as alien intrusions contrary to Afghan tradition. While in the long term such innovations made the state more powerful in Afghanistan, and were preserved by successor

(with British subsidies and weapons) in building the strongest state in Afghan history by the time he died in 1901. Also, to the surprise of his Soviet backers, Najibullah used their civilian and military aid to keep his regime intact until 1992, when the dissolution of the Soviet Union left him without an international backer. With no major international backer, Afghanistan devolved into civil war, which led to the rise of the Taliban in the 1990s.

The US and its coalition partners now seem on a similar path. For ten years, they have pursued a policy of Afghan nation-building to create a highly centralized government with a robust security force, a democratic political system, and a market economy. They have also attempted to bring social Afghan norms in line with international values. These plans to reorganize Afghan society and government have proved far more difficult to implement than expected. They have also been more expensive than first anticipated and, when insurgencies emerged, demanded a military commitment that home governments were unwilling to maintain over the long term. It is not surprising, then, that talk of international withdrawal today resembles similar periods in the past. But one thing this history also makes clear is that the situation is not black and white. In the 1990s, Afghanistan collapsed into civil war because of a complete lack of international aid and alliances, but in previous periods of international withdrawal within an international alliance structure and continued aid, Afghan leaders crafted their own political solutions to bring stability to the country. A review of that history by policymakers would pay great dividends. ■

NOTES

1. "Canada's Harper Doubts Afghan Insurgency Can Be Defeated," March 2, 2009, CNN.com, accessed July 17, 2012, <http://bit.ly/3kMNTy>.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Homeland Afghanistan is a website hosted by the Asia Society that explores the geopolitical and cultural heritage of Afghanistan through a humanities perspective. This site is designed for a secondary school audience, is beautifully constructed, and contains many useful teaching aids, <http://afghanistan.asiasociety.org/>.

Osama is a fictional film about a young girl living in Kabul who disguises herself as a boy to support her family and help her mother. The film was produced in 2003 by Siddiq Barmak, and it was the first to be made entirely in Afghanistan after the Taliban, which banned films, was driven from power. Its gritty realism depicts the extreme poverty of the country under the Taliban and those who suffered under their rule, particularly women. Winner of the 2004 Golden Globe Best Foreign Language Film, it is one of the few films that depicts Afghanistan from an Afghan point of view.

Killing the Cranes: A Reporter's Journey through Three Decades of War in Afghanistan (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2011), by journalist Edward Girardet, is a compelling, first-hand account of the suffering Afghanistan has experienced since 1978 and the consequences for its people. Few other authors have his depth of experience, eye for detail, and understanding of the country.

Bazaar Politics: Power and Pottery in an Afghan Market Town (Stanford University Press, 2011), by Noah Coburn, is an anthropological account of the Tajik village of Istalif, north of Kabul. Based on intensive ethnographic fieldwork, Coburn explores the nature of local politics in today's Afghanistan to explain how people maintain order without much in the way of government institutions.

Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History (Princeton University Press, 2010), by Thomas Barfield, traces the historic struggles and the changing nature of political authority in Afghanistan from the Mughal Empire in the sixteenth century to the Taliban resurgence today.

Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001 (Penguin Press, 2004), by Steven Coll, lays the groundwork to understand how international Cold War politics made Afghanistan a proxy battlefield for the US and the Soviet Union. The problematic outcome of that struggle created the environment for radical Islamic groups like the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

THOMAS BARFIELD is a Professor of Anthropology at Boston University and President of the American Institute for Afghanistan Studies. He first conducted ethnographic fieldwork with nomads in northern Afghanistan in the mid-1970s, and his recent research has focused on problems of law and political development in contemporary Afghanistan. He is the author of *The Central Asian Arabs of Afghanistan* (1981), *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China* (1989), and coauthor of *Afghanistan: An Atlas of Indigenous Domestic Architecture* (1991). In 2007, Barfield received a Guggenheim Fellowship that supported the research for his latest book, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton, 2010).

NEW! EDUCATION ABOUT ASIA ONLINE ARCHIVES

Thirteen Years of "Education About Asia" at Your Fingertips!

- Registration and access to the archives is free!
- Browse Tables of Contents; view and download articles from all thirty-seven back issues from 1996–2008
- Search for articles by country, author, title, or keyword
- A three-year "moving wall" will keep the archives current. For instance, all three 2009 issues will be added at the end of 2012; the three issues for 2010 will be added at the end of 2013, etc.

Subscribe or Renew Your Subscription to the Print Edition Today!

To ensure that you have access to the most recent issues of this unique publication, please support *Education About Asia* by subscribing or renewing your print subscription today. Subscription information and rates are available at www.asian-studies.org/EAA. Each issue brings you articles on all areas of Asia, with subjects ranging from ancient cultures and literatures to current affairs, along with essays describing classroom-tested educational programs, and guides to movies, documentaries, books, curriculum guides, and online resources.

We hope you will make every effort to introduce educators, students, and the public to *Education About Asia*—and make sure that the library in your own school, college, or university subscribes.

Register for the archives and subscribe to the print edition at www.asian-studies.org/EAA

