

Review - The Wars of Afghanistan

Written by Martin J. Bayly

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MARTIN J. BAYLY, MAY 28 2012

The Wars of Afghanistan

By Peter Tomsen

New York: Public Affairs, 2011

As Hegel once suggested, the one lesson from history is that people and governments never learn from history. This maxim seems to have particular relevance to Afghanistan. As the long-serving Russian Ambassador in Afghanistan reportedly said to his British counterpart, former Ambassador Sherard Cowper-Coles, on his arrival in Kabul in 2007, 'I have a very warm feeling towards you Sherard... you are making all the same mistakes as we did'.^[1] But whilst history may provide many lessons, is it a good teacher? In an arena as contested as Afghanistan,^[2] a question worth asking is whose history are we talking about? Who is doing the narrating?

Peter Tomsen's *The Wars of Afghanistan* is the latest contribution to the history of Afghanistan's conflicts and the role outsiders have played in them. The book focuses particularly on the late 1970s onwards. Tomsen is a highly decorated, and highly experienced, US diplomat who began his career in the late 1960s with posts in Southeast Asia, moving on to senior roles in India, China, and Moscow. From 1989-1992 he served as George H. W. Bush's special envoy to the Mujahideen. His final job in the State Department was as Ambassador to Armenia from

Review - The Wars of Afghanistan

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1995-1998. Despite this breadth of experience, it is Tomsen's time in Afghanistan that seems to have most significantly coloured his career.

Where to start? Well one criticism that certainly cannot be leveled at the work is that it suffers from undue brevity. At over 700 pages this is certainly a weighty tome. Arguably this is necessary. The book begins with a brief discussion of Afghanistan's long history of outside encounters. As those familiar with this period will be aware, this includes British attempts to satisfy their security needs on their Indian frontier. Tomsen presents this as the first of many modern examples of failure in outsiders' efforts to achieve their ends in the 'Afghan quagmire'. These failures he attributes principally to foreign governments' 'misunderstanding of the complicated mosaic of Afghan tribes and the influence of religious leaders.' (46-7). This argument is crucial, for it is the closest we come to a common thread unifying the work, and in turn provides an overarching historical 'lesson'. Armed with this argument, Tomsen moves on to elaborate his understanding of how this 'complicated mosaic' works.

For Tomsen, Afghanistan's political community can be described as a 'tribal incubator', but alongside this analytical lens he places the competing influences of Islam, state, and ethnicity. These moral 'faultlines' as David B. Edwards has referred to them^[3] contribute to an enduring tension underpinning the 'incomplete' centralization of the authority of the Afghan state. They have had a centrifugal effect on Afghanistan's political community through their competing loyalties. Loyalties which in turn have been exploited by domestic actors seeking to bolster their claims to power; as well as external actors seeking to achieve their own ends in the space occupied by Afghanistan – both strategies have normally met with failure in the long term. By drawing out the internal problems he considers most salient to understanding Afghanistan's politics, Tomsen provides his own framework for analysis that puts into context the rest of the work.

It is to this record that the book then turns. Having won independence from the British following the brief third Anglo-Afghan War of 1919,^[4] the question of how Afghanistan should be run immediately brought to the fore the fracture lines that Tomsen elaborates. This, he argues, was exacerbated by the radical modernization programme attempted by the reigning monarch King Amanullah. These political, social, and economic reforms angered conservative elements within Afghan society. Fleeing these uprisings Amanullah was replaced eventually by Nadir Shah, whose reign coincided with the 'era of tranquillity' from 1929-1978. Notwithstanding the international conditions that allowed such a state of affairs to occur (despite Nazi attempts to provoke the border tribes into an uprising against the British, see p.83), this period offers an interesting insight into the stability that has prevailed within Afghanistan in recent history.

The era of tranquillity came to a shuddering halt in the late 1970s with the Saur Revolution, which led to the Soviet intervention. Tomsen meticulously narrates the individuals and the ideas that lay behind this tragedy and the civil war that followed it. The Soviet efforts are described as '[o]ne state model ... forced onto another' (209). Meanwhile, through American counter measures, Pakistan's leader Zia ul-Haq was increasingly empowered in his engagement with Afghan resistance leaders, promoting a legacy that bedevils American efforts in the region to this day. During this period whilst the Soviets alienated the Afghan population with their heavy handed approach, and ideologically-driven initial efforts at statebuilding, Tomsen shows how the Americans became mired in bureaucratic infighting. He illuminates the tensions inherent between and within the Washington departments of state each of whom had their own conception of the best way to secure American interests in the region. Soviet withdrawal in 1989 did nothing to alleviate this tension as the CIA continued to see Afghanistan as 'their' war (356). Tomsen's State Department-driven promotion of political solutions was meanwhile met with a stonewall. This was summed up by Democratic Senator Charlie Wilson's rather blunt appraisal to Tomsen and his State Department colleague that 'the agency thinks you and Oakley are full of shit' (351).^[5] This was a rivalry that would continue until inevitably a distraction emerged in the form of the Gulf War. Afghanistan soon became seen as 'a conflict left over from the Cold War' (422). Indeed following the collapse of the Soviet Union Afghanistan was once again proposed as a superpower proxy, this time as a test bed for negotiated arms reductions between Russia and the US.

It is during this period of US policy involvement in Afghanistan that Tomsen is at his most illuminating. His time in post, as President George H.W. Bush's official envoy to the Mujahideen is an experience that he skilfully feeds into the work, lending it an air of authority as a diplomatic perspective on recent affairs. A number of 'declassified' texts,

Review - The Wars of Afghanistan

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interviews with key players, and personal experiences bring alive the narrative, and adds a number of insights. More than this, Tomsen's dogged efforts to convince distracted Washington elites that Afghanistan needed a political settlement to avoid descending into further bloodshed were as admirable as they were ultimately futile.

US policy indifference reached new levels during the 1990s. As Tomsen points out, there was a 'complete lack' of Afghan policy prior to 9/11 (557). Alongside this dereliction of duties was an increasingly delusional view of Pakistan's growing role in promoting instability in the region. Both of these trends left policy makers ill equipped to deal with the challenge presented by Afghanistan, as well as Pakistan, in the post-2001 period. The overbearing US influence on the selection of Karzai as transitional leader delegitimized him in the long run and the crucial role of Pakistan was neglected until it was too late.

This contemporary narrative wraps up with Tomsen's own suggestions on how to move towards a better outcome for the Afghanistan conflict, with the last chapter functioning as a policy briefing. The advice rests on two central tenets: The first is a process of 'de-Americanizing' the war, and putting Afghans in charge. US withdrawal will not only establish the grounds for a genuine sense of Afghan nationalism that will be hard to resist, but will avoid the perception of US occupation. Here again, there is historical resonance. As General Frederick Roberts suggested in the aftermath of the second Anglo-Afghan War in 1880, 'I feel sure that I am right when I say that the less the Afghans see of us the less they will dislike us' (41). In essence the process Tomsen advocates here is similar to the transition process now underway. However, he views this as a matter of urgency and demands far closer inter-agency cooperation within Washington itself, a problem that he argues is yet to be overcome.

The second tenet requires forcing a shift in Islamabad with respect to its foreign policy in Afghanistan. It is here that Tomsen believes the greater opportunity for American influence lies: 'The most valuable contribution that America can make to Afghan peace lies not in Afghanistan but in Pakistan.' He argues for a 'tougher' approach, one that seeks results not assurances, based on a number of policy actions including conditioning US aid disbursement and threatening to place Pakistan on the US list of state sponsors of terrorism.

So how should we judge this work? In summary, it is best to view *The Wars of Afghanistan* as essentially a diplomatic history. Tomsen's diplomatic experience makes this part of his narrative not only illuminating but also highly readable. There are interesting historical footnotes too, such as the sending of Afghan Mujahideen to support coalition forces against Saddam Hussein's war of aggression. The downside to this detail is that the wider argument is sometimes distracted by the intricacies of the diplomatic story – a story which is often the narration of outsiders. The point made at the beginning of the book on the destabilizing *domestic* features of the Afghan state, and the failures of outsiders to understand them, is at times somewhat distant. Furthermore, this description of Afghanistan internal societal features lacks some of the supporting literature.

The idea that Afghanistan's political community is inherently fractious is not an uncontroversial proposition. Two examples of recent works that have addressed the origins and nature of this community in detail include Benjamin Hopkins' *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*, and Christine Noelle's *Tribe and State in Nineteenth Century Afghanistan*, both of which are not included in the bibliography. As these works demonstrate, colonial legacies have to varying degrees impacted the form and function of the Afghan state, but arguably the greatest impact has been on the discourses, representations, and perceptions that frame Afghanistan itself.[6] This includes the tribal taxonomies that Tomsen puts at the centre of his argument.

It is important for a reviewer not to critique a book on the grounds that it is 'not the book I would have written', but in contributing to serious debates there is arguably a responsibility to be as well-informed as possible – particularly when leading to policy prescriptions. To give credit where credit is due, Tomsen has clearly drawn on his extensive list of Afghan contacts, as listed in the acknowledgements. However, the lack of supporting literature isn't helped by the language which at times strays into ill-formed stereotypes. Examples include, 'Violence ... was an accepted and expected option in Afghan tribal politics when consensus was out of reach' (5); or descriptors such as 'fragmented, tribal, Afghanistan' (130); 'Afghanistan's Hobbesian state of chaos' (326); 'the land of the blood feud' (214); and the occasional reference to Afghanistan's 'tribal fighters'. One needn't be a member of the Edward Said Appreciation Society to raise an eyebrow at such representations. Such language further risks mistaking the trappings of Afghan

Review - The Wars of Afghanistan

Written by Martin J. Bayly

society for the causes of political violence, and the motivator of Afghanistan's wars. Quite apart from the external factors, the internal factors are deserving of a more nuanced appraisal than this.

Such descriptions are at least in part a reflection of the ways in which Afghanistan's history has become represented by outsiders, and this is not Tomsen's fault. But it raises the further observation about the way in which this region as a whole is portrayed in certain settings. Rather than challenging such perceptions, Tomsen – at times – unfortunately perpetuates them. It is ironic that in his closing policy recommendations his full-throated call for US drawdown sits alongside the recommendation to 'continue the drone strikes against al-Qaeda and other terrorist training bases on the lawless Frontier'. His urging of a firm line on Pakistan further risks simply shifting the errors of past US policy in Afghanistan further south. It is further evidence of the 'crisis state' mentality that has recently defined US Foreign Policy towards Pakistan.[7] In this sense the lesson from history is an unexpected one. Great powers have always exhibited a tendency to view their peripheries or frontiers in threatening terms, as representative of the unknown, the violent, the unpredictable, or in the words of Manan Ahmed 'a site of anxiety, of potential harm, of barbarians who could be marching towards the gate'.[8]

In conclusion then, Tomsen has provided a comprehensive account of Afghanistan's recent conflicts. At times, he illuminates aspects of this history in ways that only he could really achieve. He also succeeds in demonstrating how these failures have often been due to misperceptions concerning the nature of the Afghan state, its society, and its political community. That said, as Tomsen clearly shows, many of the errors committed in the recent intervention have had far more to do with 'the West', than with the 'tribal Afghans'. Whilst historical lessons clearly abound, assessing whether this history can ever be a good teacher will demand the question of whose history we are referring to. In addition we must also ask to what extent this 'understanding' will aid future ventures. Such historical lesson learning may be a useful exercise for those who have followed Hegel's prophesy and failed to learn, but such projects should avoid falling into the familiar trap of perpetuating hegemonic discourses and providing erroneously derived examples of what Tarak Barkawi has describes as 'a policy science for the powerful'.[9] Whilst *The Wars of Afghanistan* may be a comprehensive work, it is not a definitive work, and it carries the voices and representations of outsiders looking in. In this sense too then, history is repeating.

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[1] The Russian Ambassador at the time was Zamir Kabulov who had served in the role since 1979. See Sherard Cowper-Coles, *Cables From Kabul* (London: Harper Press, 2011), 32. The original quotation is written phonetically in order to capture the Russian accent.

[2] For 'contested' history in Afghanistan see Robert Johnson, *The Afghan Way of War*, (London: Hurst, 2011).

[3] David B. Edwards, *Heroes of the Age: Moral Faultlines on the Afghan Frontier* (London: University of California Press, 1996). It is worth noting that Edwards omits ethnicity from his understanding of these faultlines focusing on 'tribe', 'Islam', and 'rule'. This work is not cited in Tomsen's book.

[4] Although Afghanistan was never 'officially' colonized by the British, they had long enjoyed control over Afghanistan's foreign policy by virtue of a treaty agreement reached in the aftermath of the second Anglo-Afghan War (1878-80).

[5] The colleague in question was Robert Oakley, US Ambassador to Afghanistan 1988-1991. Charlie Wilson's role in the Soviet-Afghan war was of course made famous in the film *Charlie Wilson's War*.

[6] See also, Benjamin Hopkins and Magnus Marsden, *Fragments of the Afghan Frontier* (London: Hurst, 2012).

[7] For a critique of this stance see Mahleea Lodhi (ed.), *Pakistan: Beyond the Crisis State* (London: Hurst, 2011).

Review - The Wars of Afghanistan

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[8] Manan Ahmed, 'Adam's Mirror: The Frontier in the Imperial Imagination', *Economic and Political Weekly*, March 26, 2011. Available online at <http://blogs.fu-berlin.de/frontiers/files/2011/04/15877.pdf>.

[9] Tarak Barkawi, 'Empire and Order in International Relations and Security Studies', in Denmark, Robert A, (ed.), *The International Studies Encyclopedia, Vol. III* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 1360-1379. Available online: http://nssr.academia.edu/TarakBarkawi/Papers/312624/Empire_and_Order_in_International_Relations_and_Security_Studies