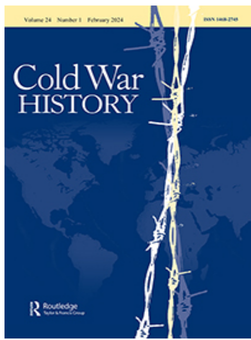

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Afghan Crucible: the Soviet invasion and the making of modern Afghanistan

Elizabeth Leake, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), xxiii + 343 pp.

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What could those in and beyond the academy learn from a sweeping work of the order that Chien-Wen suggests? Historicising an anticommunist ecumene in Southeast Asia is a vast intellectual endeavour but one with profound reward. Such a project demands multi-archival research and a synthesis of historical, sociological, anthropological and political science scholarship. In today's geopolitical moment, policy audiences could gain insight into Southeast Asian nations' decision-making process and cultural views towards US-China geopolitical competition. *Diasporic Cold Warriors* is a rewarding analytical contribution to this conceptual pursuit, and specialists and non-specialists gain from reading Chien-Wen's rich research and analytical work that compels readers to push their thinking beyond the narrow confines of standard Cold War narratives.

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Elizabeth Leake, ***Afghan Crucible: the Soviet invasion and the making of modern Afghanistan*** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), xxiii + 343 pp.

Afghan Crucible is one of the more comprehensive recent accounts of Afghanistan under Soviet occupation from 1979 to 1989. It is a valuable publication for any student or scholar of global, Central Asian and Afghan Cold War history, as it reconceptualises the way in which the implications of the occupation for Afghan governance have conventionally been understood. It portrays the occupation and the concurrent civil war not as a descent into prolonged and unresolved military conflict in a powerless, peripheral state during the late Cold War period. Rather, it portrays this pivotal episode of Afghan history as a sustained and severe test for competing interpretations of the meaning of modernity in Afghanistan and beyond (p. xx). What is more, it situates those actors, events and ideas that may hitherto have been known primarily to seasoned observers of Afghan politics within a global context of empire, decolonisation and struggling international institutions.

According to Elizabeth Leake, the war in Afghanistan was primarily a clash between different Afghan, as well as foreign visions of the future (p. xxii). It was the cumulation of an ongoing debate on the nature of Afghan politics and the role of Afghan citizens therein, as well as the relationship between state sovereignty and the international system of states (p. xxii). It is a history of ideas, of the interplay between socialism, Islamism, constitutional monarchism and parliamentarianism within a political context that had arguably been exempted from, but which was nevertheless deeply affected by the global expansion of European empires during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The book itself is divided into nine chapters. Each offers a different lens of analysis and examines how different groups of actors approached the war in their specific geographical locations (p. 1). Chapter one sets the stage by delving into the intellectual and political discourse that shaped existing perceptions of Afghan modernity prior to

the Soviet invasion of 1979. By 1964, Afghanistan was a constitutional monarchy and under its ruling monarch, King Zaher Shah, parliament passed legislation, which allowed the formation of various political parties (p. 14). One of these parties was the communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). The PDPA was a party of deep internal contradictions. It split into two competing factions as early as 1967. The so-called *Khalq* faction, led by Mohammad Taraki, promoted a workers-led revolution along Leninist lines, while the *Parcham* faction, led by Babrak Karmal, advocated more moderate, national-democratic reforms (p. 20).

Both factions re-united in 1977. However, as chapter two goes on to show, the PDPA's most fundamental problems intensified. Its leaders tended to associate organised religion with feudalism and backwardness, blaming it for the absence of a strong, centralised state in Afghanistan (p. 61). After gaining power in a *coup d'état* in 1978, the PDPA introduced sweeping economic, political and social reforms, which were met with resistance both from the general population, as well as from diverse armed resistance groups (p. 45). What was more, in an internal coup, Hafizullah Amin upstaged and removed President Mohammad Taraki in September 1979. According to Leake, the Soviet invasion of December 1979 took place primarily to reinforce the unstable socialist government under PDPA rule (p. 69). It was arguably not even intended to become a war (p. 69). Rather, Soviet observers had reasons to doubt both Amin's devotion to socialist ideology and his loyalty to the Soviet Union (p. 75). As chapter three shows, Soviet decision-making with regard to Afghanistan was not without precedent. In 1968, Leonid Brezhnev had dispatched troops into Czechoslovakia for similar reasons and during the 1970s, Soviet support for communist movements in Angola and Ethiopia had been partially successful (p. 72).

Chapters four and five outline many of the obstacles that the Soviet forces faced in achieving their original aims. Most notably they and their Afghan counterparts faced a complex web of shifting alliances among scarcely coordinated Islamic resistance groups, collectively known as the *mujahideen*. A number of these groups emerged in political exile in Iran and Pakistan prior to the Soviet invasion itself. Yet while many resistance groups were united in their opposition to the Soviet invasion, Marxism and atheism, they disagreed over a number of other substantial issues. What would an Islamic Afghanistan entail, for instance? How would Afghanistan reconcile its ethnic, tribal, religious and social diversity? Or what role would the resistance play in the event of a Soviet withdrawal (p. 45)?

Leake demonstrates in great detail that many resistance movements had fundamentally different visions of what Afghanistan's future political hierarchy ought to look like. This proved to be detrimental to the pursuit of Afghan modernity in the aftermath of the Soviet withdrawal of 1989. Whereas the intellectual and political discourse of the pre-war period had developed around competing ideas for the best form of government, disagreements among the resistance descended into arguments that primarily revolved around power distribution among competing factions.

Chapters six, seven and eight add an international dimension to this dilemma by introducing the involvement of the United States, characterising the predicament of Afghan refugees and analysing the role of the United Nations (UN) in negotiating the so-called Geneva Accords of 1988. By 1987, Leake estimates that the United States provided an annual US$700 million in military assistance to the resistance (p. 170). Yet arguably unlike the Soviet Union, US policy-makers demonstrated limited interest in the future development of Afghanistan (p. 172). Funnelling covert assistance to the Afghan resistance primarily prolonged the Afghan conflict

at the expense of the Soviet Union, but also to the detriment of peace in Afghanistan and of a previously vibrant discourse over the meaning of Afghan modernity.

Meanwhile, the situation of millions of Afghan refugees and internally displaced civilians became increasingly permanent. Interestingly, chapter seven argues that refugee camps in neighbouring Pakistan and Iran also became sites of competition over Afghan modernity. In Pakistan, for instance, the authorities required foreign aid to be provided through government channels. At the same time, the Pakistani authorities also channelled foreign military aid to the resistance and refugee camps became recruitment grounds for competing resistance parties, undermining 'UNHCR attempts to keep the camps apolitical' (p. 208).

Neither refugee representatives nor resistance fighters were included in the diplomatic deliberations that eventually led to the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. Between 1982 and 1988, representatives of the Soviet-installed Afghan regime and the Pakistani government periodically met in Geneva under the auspices of the UN. Chapter eight discusses the incremental progress of these talks and addresses the reasons why they eventually produced an agreement that was insufficient to restore peace to Afghanistan. The accords themselves were designed to enable a 'Soviet withdrawal, the resumption of friendly regional relations, the return of Afghan refugees and the affirmation of Afghan self-determination' (p. 245). They did not address the future form of government for Afghanistan or take into consideration long-standing debates on the nature of Afghan modernity. Chapter nine correspondingly covers the renewed descent into civil war after the collapse of the Soviet-installed Afghan regime of Mohammad Najibullah in 1992.

Overall, *Afghan Crucible* provides several substantial insights into the roles of local, regional and international actors during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989. Similar to Timothy Nunan's investigations into the role of humanitarianism in the Afghan context, Elizabeth Leake introduces a new conceptual lens through which to examine this critical period in Afghan history.[1] By focusing on competing ideas of Afghan modernity, she sheds light not only the plurality of views on this subject at the time of the Soviet invasion, but on how these have struggled to co-exist and evolve under the oppressive weight of the Soviet occupation. Ultimately, socialism, Islamism, constitutional monarchism and parliamentarianism withered 'on the field of battle', yet as Leake convincingly shows, this was by no means a foregone conclusion.

Afghan Crucible argues that the war in Afghanistan was 'a battle for the future' of the country, a 'conflict driven by ideas and aspirations that receded into the background and into the past' (p. 270). The paradox behind this realisation is inherent in Leake's definition of modernity, which she understands as a claims-making project 'to transition from a past to a different future, to change the individual's, the community's and ultimately the nation's practices and understandings of their role in politics and society' (p. 4). In essence, Leake shows that there was no shortage of potential for the modernisation of Afghanistan during the 1980s. However, instead of fulfilling this potential, the 'tangled intersection between domestic, regional, and international affairs at a moment of broader global change' led to a long-winding descent into civil and transnational conflict (p. 270).

This descent also had important consequences for the international system of the late Cold War period. The emergence of Afghan socialism and Islamism was a direct consequence of earlier decades of political reform and change. Chapter one of *Afghan Crucible* illustrates this in substantial detail. Yet these developments did not take place

[1]See Timothy Nunan, *Humanitarian Invasion: Global Development in Cold War Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

in a vacuum. They took place after the demise of most European empires, at time when the nation-state became globally accepted as the principal building block of the international system enshrined in the UN Charter of 1945. The Soviet invasion of 1979 challenged the basic principles of international law and violated the sovereignty and self-determination of an ostensibly independent country (p. 229). As Leake points out in *Afghan Crucible*, this was not an issue that the UN was able to resolve. Its membership was restricted to independent nation-states and its most powerful members were given the prerogative to block UN action on some of the most basic tenets of its charter. Consequently, the Soviet invasion was not sanctioned by the Security Council and the civil war, which continued after the Soviet withdrawal of 1989, remained unresolved.

There are a few questions, which *Afghan Crucible* leaves open for further research. How unique was the Afghan case? How idiosyncratic were Afghan conceptualisations of modernity during this decade and how did they contrast with other Islamic societies at the time? What were the contributions of ordinary people to these debates and how were they received by the public in different parts of the country and beyond? Lastly, what does the Afghan case tell us about the broader conceptual relationships between sovereignty, modernity and conflict at the end of the Cold War? By indirectly raising these questions, *Afghan Crucible* extends an invitation for further research into the concept of modernity in areas of the globe that require more sustained scholarly attention.

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