

Review

Afghanistan: A History from 1260 to the Present, Jonathan L. Lee, London: Reaction Books, 2018, ISBN 978-1-78914-010-1 (hbk), 780 pp.

In the past few decades, Afghanistan's history has garnered much attention, becoming the focus of a wide range of works by historians and other social scientists, journalists, military and political practitioners, and others interested in the country in one way or another. Greater and easier access to primary source materials and translations into English of Afghanistan's official historical narratives have contributed to deconstructive and iconoclastic debates on the origin of Afghanistan as a distinct political entity, roles played by the country in major power politics—often with exaggerations to accommodate ongoing events—and many other aspects of Afghan history, society, and culture. The proliferation of publications on Afghanistan has also included a great number of redundancies and works with very dubious, if not outright inaccurate sourcing or opinion pieces with the veneer of being scientific historiographies.

In this backdrop, the most intriguing aspect of this massive book by social historian Jonathan L. Lee, who has published several books dealing directly or in part with Afghanistan, is its title *Afghanistan: A History from 1260 to the Present*. Conventional historiography of Afghanistan as separate political entity with Afghans (Pashtuns) at the helm in their ancestral lands begins in 1747 when Ahmad Khan Abdāli (later Ahmad Shah Durrani) carved out a regional empire after the murder of its overlord

Nādir Shah Afshār. In recent years, more deconstructive historiography based on original Persian-language sources, including Ahmad Shah's official history, as well as studies independent of Afghanistan's official historical narrative, have debated issues such as whether the Durrani monarch founded a specific geo-political space named specifically "Afghanistan" or that the country, its borders, and indeed its name, were formed gradually. In the 1930s, Afghanistan's official narratives linked the country to Āryānā in the pre-Islamic period and to Khorāsān after the Islamic conquests. Some iconoclastic historians of Afghanistan, mainly among the non-Pash-tuns, have claimed that the country as such is ahistorical, and some refer to the entire country as Khorāsān, harking back to the pre-Pashtun domination of the region. While this debate is continuing, no historian has claimed 1260 as the beginning of Afghanistan.

Lee never clarifies the significance of the year 1260 as the beginning of Afghanistan. As with most of the work, he just states it and moves on, offering no substantiating sources or counterarguments. In the first chapter, entitled "Afghan Sultanates, 1260–1732," the author writes that the Khaljis/Khalaj seized power in Delhi in 1290 and ruled northern India for thirty years (p. 55). There are several historical problems in Lee's assertion that Afghanistan's history began in 1290 with the Khalaj dynasty in northern India. The assumption that the Khalaj were an Afghan tribe (p. 54) goes against what the late eminent British historian of the Ghaznavids, Clifford E. Bosworth, has written, which is the only source cited for the section. Bosworth clearly distinguishes between Afghans and the Khalaj and notes them as two different people. Moreover, for Bosworth and many Afghan historians, the term "Afghanistan" is not taken ethnically but rather territorially.¹ The term refers not to the rule of Afghans outside of the current boundaries of the country, for example when the Lodis (1451–1526) and the short-lived Suri dynasty (1540–56) ruled in northern India or the Ghilza'i Hotaks ruled in Iran (1722–29). Rather it refers to all of the dynasties that were based in the territory comprising modern Afghanistan.

Based on the title of the book, the reader would expect that Lee would be introducing a new idea, based on original sources and new argumentations, after clarifying to whom and to which historical juncture the term applied, about the formation of Afghanistan other than the widely accepted start with Ahmad Shah's Durrani kingdom. However, as is the case for most of the work, the reader is utterly disappointed. Lee does not go into any details of the "Afghan Sultanates" stretching from 1260 to 1732, only devoting seven pages to the issue. Lee's remaining 700 pages cover the conventional Durrani dynasty to modern times. "Afghanistan is the product of a series of fortuitous circumstances precipitated initially by the break-up of the Safavid, Mughal and Uzbek empires" is how Lee begins his lengthy conclusion, without a word about the events of 1260 to the mid-eighteenth century (p. 684).

Beyond its confusing title, the book suffers from engrained problems with sourcing, contradictory statements, historical accuracy, organization, editing, and clear

¹Bosworth, *The Ghaznavids*, pp. 35–36, 109.

distinction between history and personal opinions. The massive history has little more than a page of information on sources used. The only rationale given for lack of proper sourcing is the author's attempt to keep "the text to a manageable length" (p. 712). Perhaps omitting a few pages of random text in favor of proper sourcing would have made the book more of a history than a story. While the book relies heavily on English-language sources, there are indications that the author can access Persian, German, and Italian sources (pp. 733–4, 737, 751–2); however, few, if any, of these sources have been cited.

The author's lack of basic understanding of the sources on Afghan history is most evident in his indication that *Tāj al-tawārikh* was written by Amir 'Abd al-Rahmān Khan and published in Kabul in 1900 (p. 753). In fact, *Tāj al-tawārikh* is one of the later titles adopted for the Persian translation of *The Life of Abdur Rahman Amir of Afghanistan* written by Sultan Mahomed [sic] Khan. The Persian version with the title *Tāj al-tawārikh* was first published in 1904 in Bombay (Mumbai), not in 1900 in Kabul. Lee cites both works as being two distinct sources, whereas in fact they are the same source, and neither was written by 'Abd al-Rahman (pp. 110, 731). Moreover, the author provides two publication dates, 1900 and 1901 (pp. 728, 748) for *The Life of Abdur Rahman* which was published in 1900 in London. The author lists both dates. The tale of 'Abd al-Rahman's biography/autobiography is a longstanding debate among historians of Afghanistan, including Mir Muhammad Siddiq Farhang—erroneously listed as "Sadiq"—whose important work on Afghanistan's history Lee lists in his bibliography but never cites (p. 751). While sparingly citing what can be categorized as the first official history of Afghanistan, Lee compares it with later British accounts of the Durrani kingdom, citing two folios from *Trāikh-i Ahmad Shahi* (p. 106). A more in-depth reading of the latter work would surely have made it evident that it is "not consistent with accounts of European travelers" and would have added welcome research into Afghanistan's history.

Throughout his work, Lee makes bold statements without providing a single source. The following are examples: doubting historians' portrayal of "Ahmad Shah as acting in defense of Nadir Shah" before the latter was murdered (p. 103); "[n]ationalist historians, as well as most European ones, claim[s]" about the location of the meeting place of Ahmad Shah's assumption of power (p. 107); "the claims" about Ahmad Shah's changing of his cognomen (p. 113); "nationalists in the twentieth century" dubbing an Afghan mythical heroine as Joan of Arc; references to "contemporary Persian histories" (pp. 380–81); rumors circulating about the true identity of Amir Habib Allah's assassins (p. 452); Muhammad Dā'ud discussing "a power-sharing deal with Babrak Karmal" (p. 575); and "[i]nformed sources in Mazar" reporting on Rasul Pahlawan's murder (p. 638). While some of the claims made by Lee are accurate, others are only hearsay or debatable. In a book dubbed "history," there is a need for sourcing, especially when contradicting an array of sources, including primary ones.

The book has a long list of inaccuracies that are linked to the lack of proper sourcing and perhaps also to the chronic editorial mistakes. Lee writes that in 1896, to

“celebrate the conversion of the Kafirs,” Amir ‘Abd al-Rahman took the title of *ziyā al-millāh wa’l din* (p. 404). Later, he writes that ‘Abd al-Rahman’s son and successor, Amir Habib Allah, in 1902, celebrated his first regnal year, taking the title of *sirāj al-millāh wa’l din* and “declared an annual holiday celebrated as ... Festival of National Unity, the first non-Islamic national day to be celebrated in Afghanistan” (p. 419). In fact, it was ‘Abd al-Rahman, making use of the symbolism of his honorary title and furthering his nation-building aims, who ordered that on every 26 Asad (17 August) an annual national commemoration should be held in every corner of Afghanistan, known as *Jashn-i muttāfiqah-yi milli* (Festival of National Unity). This information is discussed in many sources and is based on *Sirāj al-tawārikh*, the most important official history of Afghanistan, written by Fayz Muhammad Katib Hazarah, which Lee lists as one of his sources, albeit he only lists the first two volumes. The whole work has been annotated and translated by Robert D. McChesney and M. Mehdi Khorrami.² The absence of this monumental translation work in Lee’s book is inexplicable.

The following are a few other shorter examples of inaccuracies. Mahmud Tarzi is not known as “Father of Afghan Nationalism” but “Father of Afghanistan’s Journalism” (p. 438). ‘Ināyat Allah had only one wife (p. 491). Karzai did not appoint “members of Saraj and Tarzi families” to any position other than one member of the latter family as an ambassador (p. 660). Lately, the Taliban were not the only side making deals with oil companies attempting to lay a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to Pakistan via Afghanistan. Burhan al-Din Rabbani, the recognized president of the country, had signed a thirty-year deal with the Argentinian company Bidas (p. 642) while ‘Abd al-Rashid Dostum was courting both Bidas and its rival company, UNOCAL.

Discussing Afghan nationalists in the early twentieth century, Lee argues that they had a “bipolar” position on the role of Islamic law, attacking Islamic leaders for “their obscurantism” while advancing that the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence—which he claims as “arguably the most conservative school”—should be the “foundation stone of Afghanistan’s social and legal system” (p. 442). Regardless of Lee’s assertion about the Hanafi school being the most conservative, an issue which at best is open to argumentation, he writes a few pages later that Afghanistan’s first constitution, written during Amān Allah’s reign (1919–29), was reflective of the views of the same nationalists but made “no mention of the Hanafi legal code” (p. 473). Why did the same group of people who favored making the Hanafi code the “foundation stone” of their country’s social and legal system make no mention of it when they had a direct hand in writing Afghanistan’s first constitution? Lee does not explore this contradiction or other apparent contradictions in his book.

Lee has named Afghan resistance leader and later politician ‘Abd al-Rabb al-Rasul Sayyāf in several ways, including ‘Abd al-Sayyāf, without explaining the nuanced change in his name. Sayyāf was originally named ‘Abd al-Rasul Sayyāf, but after becoming the favorite client of Saudi-based Islamist groups during the 1980s, he

²McChesney and Khorrami, *The History of Afghanistan*, 2013–2016.

added the qualification of “al-Rabb.” Thus his name became “slave” or “worshipper” of the Messenger’s God, not just of the Messenger, which for the strict Wahhabi interpretation would be tantamount to blasphemy (pp. 586, 611, 775).

Finally, and not to overstate the point, the book has inconsistencies in spelling of names, transliterations—including some rather unusual diacritical marks, such as the *hamza* on ‘Aman and ‘Amin, but not on Amir or Akram—editorial mistakes such as the heading of the second chapter “Nadir Shah and the Afghans, 1732–47” extending to the ninth chapter, covering 324 pages when it should have only covered twenty-seven, and lists in the index that do not appear on the pages listed—for example, see “Seraj dynasty,” where four out of eleven pages do not match.

Some errors in texts can be categorized as editorial mistakes, but the occurrences of repeated errors, inconsistencies in names, and a glaring disregard for sourcing for a series of statements in the text that are not accepted as common historical knowledge diminish its value and place the credibility of its overall accuracy in doubt. This is by an author who is identified in the book jacket as a “leading authority on the history of Afghanistan” with years of experience in the country. Unfortunately, these mistakes are illustrative of a basic lack of knowledge and understanding about the country’s history, culture and changes therein.

The final question to be raised about Jonathan Lee’s massive work is the reason behind its publication. In his editorializing segments, Lee illustrates his dismay at the lack of agency of the Afghan people in their own affairs but then is critical of almost every stage of Afghanistan’s journey to statehood. The only individual whom Lee seems to praise and defend is the controversial ‘Abd al-Rashid Dostum, who in July 2020 was appointed Marshal of Afghanistan (pp. 640, 658–9). If this book is the “last word on the history of Afghanistan,” as an endorsement in its jacket suggests, historiography of that country is in serious trouble.

Bibliography

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