Locating Afghan History

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Afghanistan's 20th century has long been seen through an analytical dichotomy. One concentration of historical scholarship has sought to explain the fraught progress of Afghan nation-building in the 1910s and 1920s. A second has sought to explain the unraveling of the Afghan nation after 1979. Weighted toward the decades at either end of the century, this dichotomized field has been problematic in both chronological (and thereby processual) and methodological terms. On the level of chronology, the missing long mid-section (indeed, half) of the century between the framing coups of 1929 and 1979 has made it difficult to convincingly join together the two bodies of scholarship. Not only has the missing middle further cemented the division of scholarly labor but it also has made it more difficult to connect the history of the last quarter of the century to that of the first quarter (except as a story of parallels), rendering them discrete narratives of development, one ending and the other beginning with a coup. The problems are deeper than this, though, extending from questions of chronology and process to matters of method. For if in its focus on nationalism and nation-building the first-quarter scholarship is framed within the neat boundaries of national spaces and actors, then in its focus on the unraveling of the nation and its peoples through the consequences of Soviet intervention, the last-quarter scholarship elevates nonnational actors as the key agents of historical process.

Herein is a double bind. For not only does the national/antinational dichotomy prevent insights into the role of international players in nation-building and of national players in nation-breaking, it also fuels the centrifugal dynamic that pushes the two ends of the century further apart as discrete historical entities. The result is that any processual glue by which the missing half-century in the middle might bind these ends together is weakened, and we are again left with a narrow set of agents and analyses. For if the two concentrations of scholarship form a dichotomy of process and method, when placed together the cumulative picture they present is still more problematically reductive than the sum of its parts. It is a classic model of nationalist analysis: Afghans built the nation, non-Afghans destroyed it. What we lose sight of is both the multiplicity of voices drowned in the clarion call of the nation and the larger sequence of transnational dynamics through the entire 20th century.

If this is necessarily a short and stark critique of the historiography of 20th-century Afghanistan, then how does the field need to develop if we are to outmaneuver the explanatory impasse? The most obvious insight is the importance of the decades between 1930 and 1980, particularly the 1930s and 1940s, which have been the least studied of all and which laid much of the institutional and ideological infrastructure that defined the spectrum of ideas, opportunities, and options for Afghans in the late 20th century. Indeed, it would probably be fair to say that it was in these two decades that the cultural–political meaning of "Afghan" and "Afghanistan" (until then a relatively empty signifier

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on the map) were most clearly defined and deployed (and, yes, debated). Yet the task at hand is more than a question of accounting for missing decades; it is also a question of framing and method—and, in turn, of sources. For the national/antinational framing of Afghanistan's 20th century has led scholars to focus on a limited and repetitive sequence of national actors (Afghan kings, politicians, rhetoricians, holy warriors) and antinational actors (British or Soviet politicians, spies, soldiers). Not only is Afghan history reduced to a bloody political drama performed by a limited range of professional types (all of them male), but also the stage on which it is performed is narrowed to the official quarters of Kabul and the occasionally hazily descried mountain. To stretch the theatrical metaphor a little further, even by the most elementary standards of historical narrative we lack a three-act structure of explanation (the mid-century second act is missing). And to strain the metaphor to the point of purposeful collapse, what the existing historiographical drama cannot reveal to us is the vast and more diverse group of backstage hands who have helped set the entire performance in motion.

What I want to suggest is that behind the familiar dramatis personae of national and antinational players stands a motley crew of subnational and transnational actors whose histories have never been told, whether as alternative stories to the dominant narrative of the making and breaking of a nation or as previously unnoticed participants in that familiar narrative. I have in mind here any number of players. At the subnational level, I think of the inhabitants of such important trading cities as Qandahar and Herat, whose wealth lent them agency comparable to the bureaucrats of Kabul; such differently influential professional groups as truck drivers and 'ulama'; the female teachers and writers whose numbers multiplied between the 1950s and 1980s; the families of Afghan exiles and merchants who from the early 1900s maintained contact with Afghanistan from such places as India, the Ottoman Empire, western Europe, and even California[1]; the communities of Afghan Jews, Hindus, and Sikhs as well as Muslim religious minorities; and the many committed Afghan communists who complicate the singular narrative of Soviet aggression. At the transnational level, reflecting R. D. McChesney's contribution to this roundtable on the importance of travel in Afghan history, I think of such figures as the Italian and German architects and technocrats who practically designed much of the nation that was built in the 1920s and 1930s; the Indian, Ottoman, and Iranian teachers and artists in dialogue with the nation-building establishment of the period[2]; the ethnically and linguistically diverse cadre of advisors, engineers, and entertainers we superficially label "Soviets"; the hippy trailers and aid workers who brought visions of a wider world to thousands of small town and rural Afghans in the 1960s and 1970s[3]; and the Arab, Chechen, and heaven knows what other militiamen, moralists, and financiers who arrived during the jihad years.[4]

Such a disparate sequence of participants inevitably raises the question of whether this is simply a naïve wish list of historical participants for whom documentation can never be found. This, however, is a point I would challenge. At the subnational level, beyond the collection of oral testimonies and ethnohistories, the abundance of modern Afghan literary works provides us with political and social testimonies that reach far beyond the official edicts of the nation, as Nushin Arbabzadah and I have recently shown.[5] At the transnational level, in the relatively accessible genre of the published memoir alone there exists a wealth of accounts of transnational Afghanistan in Urdu, Arabic, Iranian Farsi, German, French, Italian, Russian, Spanish, and even Japanese, few of which

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have been tapped.[6] The national and antinational framing of modern Afghan history has had consequences in delimiting the sources of that history, which largely comprise either official national sources (the first Afghan newspaper, the writings of the "national hero" Mahmud Tarzi, government *nizam-nama* law codes, and the occasional political memoir) or British imperial archives and the problematically incomplete records of the Cold War (both again in large part comprised of official writings).

To propose the collation of more pluralistic sets of source materials is not in any way to downplay the importance of primary materials in Afghan languages, which must remain the empirical backbone of the field. What I propose is rather the need to de-nationalize the study of Afghan history from both the outside and inside, looking at more plural histories from within and at more than British and Soviet participants from without. Moving away from the familiar material of official Afghan sources and imperial and Cold War archives will open up a richer and more complex history of an Afghanistan that truly lives up to its position at the heart of Eurasia. In turn, a fuller appreciation of the subnational and transnational dimensions of Afghan history will help us better understand that most abiding of Afghan historical problems: the instability of the state.

This issue of locating Afghan history—the question of where, in both the hard terms of physical geography and the soft terms of social geography—is finally important for practical reasons. Because the where of agent, event, and process is also the where of documentation. This leads in turn to the most pressing and practical of all questions for scholars of Afghanistan: the survival and accessibility of source material.

NOTES

[1]Robert Nichols, *A History of Pashtun Migration, 1775–2006* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[2]Nile Green, "The Trans-Border Traffic of Afghan Modernism: Afghanistan and the Indian 'Urdusphere,'" *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 53 (2011): 479–508; Tanvir Wasti, "Two Muslim Travelogues: To and from Istanbul," *Middle Eastern Studies* 27 (1991): 457–76.

[3]Ana M. Briongos, *Un Invierno en Kandahar: Afganistán Cuadernos de Viaje* (Barcelona: Laertes, 2000).

[4]Darryl Li, "Taking the Place of Martyrs: Afghans and Arabs under the Banner of Islam," *Arab Studies Journal* 20 (2012): 12–39.

[5]Nile Green and Nushin Arbabzadah, eds., *Afghanistan in Ink: Literature between Diaspora and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012). See also Wali Ahmadi, *Modern Persian Literature in Afghanistan: Anomalous Visions of History and Form* (London: Routledge, 2008).

[6]A fine recent example of the usefulness of little known German, Italian, and French sources is May Schinasi, *Kaboul 1773–1948: Naissance et croissance d'une capitale royale* (Naples: Università degli Studi di Napoli L'Orientale, 2008).

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