

Although there is some discussion of taxation as it affects military and administrative structures there is very little economic or social history here. Such a significant narrative of the rise and expansion of the Ottoman Empire would benefit from some consideration of the broader Ottoman society and economy. This is particularly important given Agoston's stated desire that this section "serve as a synthetic narrative of the emergence of the Ottoman Empire in its European context" (p. 7). A "synthetic narrative" should look beyond the purely military and political.

Similarly, the focus of this volume is on the Balkans and Ottoman conflict with Hungary and the Habsburgs. Developments in the structure of the Ottoman administration are presented almost entirely as a result of these interactions. Although mentioned briefly the important conflicts to the East—first with other Turkic *beyliks*, then with the Mamluks and Safavids—are only minimally integrated into the larger arguments of the book. Many of the issues he raises in reference to development to the West, such as dynastic marriage, administrative structures, and state ideology, have equally important precedents in the East. Further, Agoston says he wants to show the "continued significance of religion" (p. 7) in the expansion of the empire and does discuss the rhetoric of *ghaza* in the early Ottoman state and Hungarian and Habsburg self-depictions as the bulwark of Christendom. This argument though, remains in the rhetorical realm of treaties and would be bolstered in drawing more on Ottoman narratives. It also would have strengthened the argument to delve into the use of religion in conflict with other Muslim states. Despite these few issues, this volume is a substantial contribution to Ottoman military history and will be useful for both Ottomanists and Europeanists.

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Afghanistan: a history from 1260 to the present

By Jonathan L. Lee. pp. 780. London, Reaktion Books, 2018.

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An old Afghan story narrates that when God made the world, whatever was left over was put together to create Afghanistan. Jonathan L. Lee's magnum opus enables us to fully understand this old saying. Starting with 1260 and coming up to about 2017, this nearly 800-page work is a remarkable effort in narrating the story of perhaps one of the world's most complex countries. Lee's long association with Afghanistan gives him the depth and breadth to assess sharply and, without veering away from the main subject, weave together a long, yet fast-paced and engaging narrative.

Starting with a topographical and sociological survey of Afghanistan, Lee introduces the various ethnicities, tribes and loyalties which make Afghanistan such a complicated country. The first chapter then, rather quickly, covers the period from 1260 to 1732. Lee's main purpose here is to show that Afghan history does not begin with the oft-repeated story of Ahmed Shah, but that it has its antecedents in the period dating back to the Ghaznavids and Ghurids in the tenth and eleventh centuries. In fact, Lee argues "The Ghurids incorporated the Khalaj *ghulams* into their army and it was during

this era that they and probably the tribes of the Khyber area began to be known as Afghan” (p. 54), thus formally starting the story.

Focusing next on the rise of the Abdalis, Lee notes that their rise to “political prominence as clients of a Persian, Shi’a monarchy has been largely airbrushed out of modern Afghan historiography...” (p. 66). He also notes the oft-missed fact that since even Ahmed Shah was born in Mughal Multan, “all of these rulers, though Afghans, were culturally more Multani...some had even married Hindu women” (p. 87). Questioning the long-believed story of the “election” of Ahmed Shah as king and its confirmation by Sabir Shah, Lee contends that Sabir Shah was not a very well-respected sage, and nor was Ahmad Shah “elected”. Lee therefore asserts that “Ahmed Shah’s assumption of kingship in 1747 was a military coup by a small clique” (p. 113). Busting more myths about Ahmed Shah Abdali, Lee notes that his various attacks on Mughal India further weakened the already feeble rule of Muslims in India and that his frequent “jihad” against Hindus and Sikhs “left a legacy of religious hatred” in India (p. 131).

The death of Ahmed Shah Abdali, Lee shows, created such instability in Afghanistan that there were 12 regime changes in Kabul, the new capital, between 1793 and 1841. This was also the period when the “Great Game” started. The British, scared of a Russian attack on India, wanted to maintain Afghanistan and the adjacent Sikh Empire as buffer states. However, Afghanistan’s bad relations with the Sikhs, especially after the battle of Nowshera in 1823 when they lost territory between the Indus and the Khyber Pass, led to instability in the region. The failure of the Burns mission to Amir Dost Mohammad in 1837 led to the signing of the Tripartite Treaty between the British, the Sikh ruler Ranjit Singh and Shah Shuja, the deposed Amir of Kabul. Then followed the first of the “regime change” interventions by a foreign power in Afghanistan when the “Army of the Indus” marched on the country in order to restore Shah Shuja. The British were able to easily put Shah Shuja on the throne, but to sustain him was the real challenge. Soon a revolt ensued and in November 1841 the hasty and bloody British withdrawal from Kabul eventually ended the reign of Shah Shuja.

By the 1860s a “Forward Policy” had become the mainstay of the British approach in the region, meaning that now Russia was supposed to be stopped at the Oxus rather than the Indus. This led to more intervention in Afghanistan, and several attempts were made by successive Viceroy and Amirs to reach some formal agreements. However, caught between two superpowers the Amirs vacillated, and with no formal treaty forthcoming, relations deteriorated to yet another war in 1878. Here Lee challenges the received wisdom that it was the Amir Sher Ali’s stubbornness which led to the war by underscoring that most historians give “little consideration of the extreme difficulties the Amir was in at the time, caught as he was between two rival super powers...and opposition to the Anglo-Afghan alliance from his own extended family and Islamic radicals...” (p. 362). He also asserts that the real blame ought to be placed on the Forward Policy enthusiasts who actions simply inflicted “...even more misery on ordinary Afghans” (p. 361).

The result of the Second Afghan War was yet another occupation of Afghanistan and the Treaty of Gandamak of May 1879, where the new Amir, Yaqub Khan, agreed, among other things, to a British Resident at Kabul. Cavanagri was appointed to this post but very soon there was an uprising in the city in which he and all except two sepoys were killed. Here Lee makes an important point, which is often ignored, in that “the Amir had nothing to gain from the envoy’s death and everything to lose” (p. 370), and therefore should not be solely blamed for it. As expected, a British force soon descended on the capital and the Amir had to abdicate and take exile in India. Abd al-Rahman, a grandson of Dost Mohammed Khan, was then installed by the British on 21 July 1880.

Breaking the grand narrative, Lee often points out some very interesting local stories. There are several mentions of Armenians, especially as merchants and canon makers, and

he also narrates the story of Malalai where it is claimed that she brought water to the Afghan troops at the battle of Maiwand. It is said that when the Afghan fighters faltered Malalai held the Afghan flag and roused the troops with extempore Pashto couplets. Immortalised now by the Pakistani Nobel Laureate bearing the same name, Malalai has “become a symbol of Afghan women’s struggle against all forms of (male) oppression and their right to a public role in society” (p. 381).

Lee characterises Amir Abd al-Rahman’s reign as full of revolts (over 40) and repression, so that after the “Turkistan Atrocities” even Queen Victoria wrote to Salisbury “expressing her revulsion at the Amir’s conduct” (p. 394). Lee further describes the Amir’s ruthless conversion campaign in Kafiristan, the last remaining non-Muslim area in the country, and the campaign against the Shia Hazaras, killing over half of their male adults. Thus, Abd al-Rahman’s reign was neither peaceful nor did it consolidate Afghanistan to any extent, but only consolidated power in his own hands.

In the next couple of chapters, the role of Mahmud Tarzi, the “Father of Modern Afghanistan”, looms large. Tarzi rose to prominence during the reign of Habib Allah, though his main influence is visible during the rule of Amir Aman Allah, especially as he had groomed Aman Allah since childhood. Lee argues that Tarzi’s attempt at enforcing Pushtunness “sought to impose an artificial, alien identity on all non-Afghan ethnolinguistic groups and by doing so indirectly exacerbated sectarian, regional and ethnic divisions as well as alienating large sections of the population...” (p. 439). Lee goes on to note that “Tarzi’s Afghaniyya was a jumble of inappropriate ideas cut and pasted from Turkish nationalism and showed little understanding of the fluid natural of Afghanistan and Pushtun society” (p. 440). Controversially, Lee also argues that conceptions of “Afghaniyya” were closely related to Nazi ideals then prevalent in Europe. He asserts that “sympathy with Hitler’s Germany and National Socialism ran deep within the ruling elite, due in part to the government’s active promotion of Pushtun nationalism, which was increasingly conflated with ideas of racial and cultural superiority and Aryanism” (p. 526). How far this is true must be examined by future works on the period.

Discussing the Third Afghan War in 1919, Lee emphatically disputes the usual suggestion that Aman Allah launched it for Afghanistan’s independence, asserting that Aman Allah “had already declared Afghanistan independent and he knew that Britain was not in a position to do anything about it” (p. 455). Thus, it was certainly a “jihad”, as Aman Allah and his religious supporters termed it. Lee then describes the various reforms, including constitutional reforms, during Aman Allah’s reign but concludes that “The real tragedy of Aman Allah Khan’s reign is that many of the changes he sought for Afghanistan would have benefitted the country had they been introduced gradually and on a foundation of consensus” (pp. 499-500).

A significant feature of Lee’s narration of Afghan history from Aman Allah until the invasion of the Soviets in 1979 is that whenever any Afghan ruler tried to “modernise” the state, there has always been a reaction against it—and almost always led by the religious right. This factor underscores that unless religious leaders and religious thought are co-opted in the plans for a “modern” Afghanistan it will never succeed. As Lee observes, this is mainly because “change has always been a top-down affair...imposed by a ruling elite who have little interest in winning popular support” (p. 694). He also argues that “successive governments have attempted some kind of synthesis between the Islamic and European legal systems only to create a dichotomy that affirms both” (p. 695). Hence, the internal contradictions of Afghanistan remain and persist.

Lee also teases apart the importance of foreign intervention in Afghanistan as a major reason for its instability. Be it the several British attempts at regime change or its latest iteration by the Americans since 2001, all such attempts have managed to install governments without much forethought. Thus, Lee rightly notes, “Like the British colonial

administration before them, the Bush, Obama and Trump presidencies distanced themselves from anything more than token nation building and instead pursued the chimera of a military solution” (p. 691). Lee also underscores how dependency on foreign aid, be it the “money from God” during the British period, or the current multi-billion US programmes, have not only made corruption rife in the country, but have “provided little incentive to reform state institutions, and created a sense of dependency and entitlement” (p. 690).

Ultimately it is the Afghan people who have been at the losing end for centuries it seems. Reading Lee’s work, it is almost impossible not to find mention of a massacre every couple of pages, so much so that at one point the reader certainly wonders how many people are actually left alive in the country now! Lee thus fittingly notes that “ordinary people have evolved mechanisms that have allowed them to survive the vicissitudes of insecurity and the vacillations of their leaders...given the history of their country, the resilience of the ordinary Afghan is remarkable, even extraordinary” (pp. 695-696).

Lee’s broad stroke is certainly readable, well organised, and forcefully argued. Despite its long arc it challenges some long-held beliefs about Afghanistan, as well as providing some newer details and interpretations. The book could have done with a better editor, as there are several typos throughout the text. There are also a few factual mistakes, though with a book this size some are certainly to be expected (for example, on page 65, it is written that Humayun defeated Islam Shah Suri but it was actually Sikandar Shah Suri, Islam Shah having been dead for more than a year. Also, on page 527, Lee notes that in 1936 Pushtu was declared the “only” official language of Afghanistan, whereas this was not the case and Dari continued its official status. And that the Bonn Agreement was only valid for six months (p. 660), whereas six months was the period within which an Emergency Loya Jirga was supposed to be called. Despite these and some other errors, in the end, Lee’s book is certainly a primer for anyone interested in Afghanistan’s past, present, and future, and provides serious pointers for the various policymakers who are still trying to grapple with the country.

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Journey of a civilization: Indus to Vaigai

By R. Balakrishnan. 524 pp. Chennai, Roja Muthiah Research Library, 2019.

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The Indus civilisation—which inspires R. Balakrishnan and his groundbreaking book—flourished from *circa* 2500 to *circa* 1800 BC. Centred in the valley of the Indus River, it covered a total area in today’s Pakistan and India about twice that of its contemporaneous civilisations in Egypt and Mesopotamia. Since its discovery by British and Indian

¹ Andrew Robinson is the author of *The Indus* (London, 2015), in the series *Lost Civilizations*.