

Review - The Afghan Way of War

Written by Martin J. Bayly

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MARTIN J. BAYLY, MAR 1 2012

The Afghan Way of War: Culture and Pragmatism: A Critical History

by Rob Johnson

Hurst and Company (2011)

There exists a puzzling trend in the literature on Afghanistan, particularly on its 'international history'. For all the works published over the years there has been a startling neglect of Afghanistan itself. Events are often viewed in terms of outsiders' perceptions, whilst time and again, it seems, Afghan agency is neglected. In the words of the eminent historian and anthropologist Thomas Barfield, 'Afghanistan itself [often] remains just the vague backdrop in a long-running international drama where others hold the speaking parts.'^[1] Rob Johnson's *The Afghan Way of War: Culture and Pragmatism: A Critical History* is an important step in rectifying this deficiency. In the process the work brings much that is new to the historiography, and makes an important contribution to the ongoing debate over the role of culture in strategy-making.

Primarily, the *Afghan Way of War* is a book about how Afghan fighting units have conducted operations: 'reflecting on the ways in which Afghans could define victory, conceive of strategy, carry out operational planning and execute those plans during campaigns' (36). This includes how such operations have sometimes ended in negotiated

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situations, which should be of interest to many contemporary observers. But the book's central thesis concerns whether, through a closer look at Afghan actions on the battlefield, we can discern a distinctive 'way in war'.

The concept of a 'way in war' has a long history. Traditionally allied with the concept of national styles in war fighting, the literature has grown more recently under the related fields of strategic and military culture, in part prompted by Constructivist approaches to International Relations theory and Strategic Studies. This has contributed a number of insightful works in a field that had been dominated by rational actor models: a legacy of the Cold War. However, when applied to 'irregular' fighters, particularly in the case of Afghanistan, the concept is more problematic.

In part this is a problem of narrative. For Johnson, the neglect of the Afghan side of the story has resulted in a skewed account when it comes to describing the actions of Afghan fighters. In his words, '[t]he Western World's view of the Afghans and the adjacent Pashtuns of the Khyber Pakhtunkwa (North West Frontier Province) of Pakistan draws on a legacy of half-understood and often misconceived ideas from a long period of colonial contact, and distant memories of the Mujahideen struggle against Soviet Occupation in the 1980s' (p.2). In such cases, Afghan resistance can be reduced to stereotype – as motivated by religion, 'tribalism', or a crude form of ideology. Indeed, this tendency has a long history. As one observer of the 1898 'Pashtun Revolt' put it:

After having studied the attitude of the tribes from the first burst of their energy through the varied phases of their resistance, and the final collapse of the majority of sections, one is inclined to sum the causes of the outbreak up under three heads: the first of which is fanaticism, the second, fanaticism; and the third, fanaticism.[2]

Elsewhere, the neglect of Afghan history has also led to a tendency of viewing the actions of Afghan fighters as simply reactive, as a response to the strategic decisions made by their adversaries. Both positions are problematic: the fallback on stereotype and the simplistic reactive model both rob Afghan actors of their agency. Adding to the confusion, Johnson argues, is the fact that much of this history is contested; 'used to reinforce particular agendas and score moral points either in favour of continued intervention, or against it' (p.3). Despite its seductive appeal, therefore, the concept of an Afghan way of war is problematic – reliant on an under-developed, contested history, and based on cultural assumptions vulnerable to criticism.

In tackling this set of problems, *The Afghan Way of War* rests on a forensic re-examination of the archival material. Drawing on an extensive list of historic published works, as well as key archives in London, Washington, and Moscow, Johnson engages in a meticulous process of 'historical reconstruction' (p.2). Borrowing from James Belich's methodology in his work on the New Zealand Maori,[3] he first builds a picture of the movements of the Afghan units, then offers an explanation for their motives. Reflecting the balance of available archival material, his case studies tend towards outsider encounters with Afghan fighting units – primarily British, Russian, and American – yet crucially these periods are interspersed with, and put within the context of, more prolonged internal struggles, a key distinction from much of the literature on outside engagements. Beginning the historical account therefore are the dynastic struggles of 1834-42 that provided a prelude and driver of the First Anglo-Afghan War, though as Johnson points out on page 56, 'the conflicts that occurred between 1839 and 1842 were really a continuation of the dynastic struggle and civil war that had begun in 1803, or perhaps even earlier.'

With this more Afghanistan-centred approach, other factors brought to light by the detailed historical analysis make more sense. For example, Johnson finds that the resistance the British faced in the First Anglo-Afghan war was far more fragmented than many accounts suggest. Very often, Afghan fighting units joined forces with the British, a fact missed by those accounts favouring the 'graveyard of empires' thesis. In considering the preceding civil wars, these flexible alliances can be explained by pre-existing cleavages in the Afghan political community. The British waded into these unknowingly. The contemporary relevance of this observation will not be lost on those who have followed the recent conflict closely.

The civil war of 1863-6 also provides context for the later Second Anglo-Afghan War of 1878-81. Johnson again finds that the Afghan resistance was far more divided in this period than many accounts suggest. The flipside of this was that the British were increasingly instrumentalized by the Afghans. An example of this is provided from the second Anglo-Afghan War, of a Hazara war party that swooped on a Pashtun *lashkar* shadowing the British near Ghazni

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during the night. As Johnson points out, the Hazaras were taking the opportunity to launch this punitive raid knowing that the Pashtuns wouldn't bring in replacements under the noses of the British, they were 'exploiting the temporary shift in power for their own advantage' (p.126).

Such insights pervade throughout the book, a result of Johnson's meticulous methodology. The frontier skirmishes and wars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century are also dealt with in similar detail. But it is possibly the chapters on the Soviet-Afghan war and the civil wars of the 1990s that will be of most interest to those looking for insights on today's Afghanistan conflicts.

Those familiar with the history of the Soviet-Afghan War will be comfortable with idea that this was another example of outside powers wading in to a state of internal civil strife, but it is the impact of this period on fighting styles that Johnson brings to the fore. The Soviet-Afghan war not only introduced an additional ideological layer to the motivations of fighters, but schooled an entire generation in the arts of guerilla operations and political warfare (p.205). This left a legacy that lasts to this day. The 'cultural' lens of *Pashtunwali*, and the motivating call to faith of Islam both had their influence, but it is on the tactical features of this period that Johnson is most illuminating. Despite the fact that the *Mujahideen* have become synonymous with guerilla-style operations, he shows that this was rarely articulated in a coherent form of strategy. Dependent on outside support, and vulnerable to the technologically superior Soviet army, the *Mujahideen*, he argues, 'were forced into a more costly and protracted conflict in which they focused on tactics at the expense of strategy' (p.226).

Once again, the focus on the Afghan perspective allows the elaboration of a number of counter-narratives. For example, although some accounts have lionized the resistance, and betrayed an air of inevitability over their eventual ejection of the Soviets, Johnson introduces a fair degree of nuance into this reading. The fragmented nature of the *Mujahideen* groups created significant vulnerabilities in their ability to conduct joint operations. Indeed, lacking a single leader under which to unite, individual commanders held sway within their area of operations and often competed with rival groups. This included competition between Afghan groups for resources provided by the Pakistani intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).

This fragmented resistance, parts of which took on an ethnic dimension, laid the foundations for the civil war that would follow the fall of the Najibullah regime. That this would lead to the eventual rise of the Taliban and all that followed is now a well-worn path, but Johnson's more detailed analysis of this period in the final chapter (including the current insurgency) dissolves some of the more pervasive myths that have surrounded the 'Taliban' insurgency in day-to-day analysis.

On balance, the strength of *The Afghan Way of War* arguably lies in the analysis of the earlier campaigns where there are perhaps more deeply entrenched narratives, nonetheless, telling the Afghan side of the story yields a wealth of alternative perspectives on a history that continually evades a simple description. As Johnson is therefore able to show, with remarkable scholarly skill and precision, there is no single 'Afghan way of war', the history is one of transformation, of culture and pragmatism: '[e]very response has been dependent on the situation that confronted the Afghans' (36). In addition, he also demonstrates that there is a significant pay-off to be gained from a more open-minded take on the archival material. Not only do we learn more about the Afghan side of the story, but we learn more about how a failure to engage in this story has repeatedly nurtured a dangerous collection of assumptions, stereotypes, and half-truths that can never begin to capture the intricacy of the effects that Afghanistan's wars have had on its society.

Throughout the current intervention in Afghanistan, western agencies have frequently exhibited a curious narcissistic tendency. At least in public, the policy debate has often been shrouded in the sterile and generic language of state-building and counter-insurgency, and 21st Century concepts of 'global' security, insurgency, and terrorism. These discourses are devoid of all context-specificity, they exude a seductive broad appeal that guards against a more thorough engagement with the task at hand. One is reminded of the comments made by John Kaye, in his voluminous history of the First Anglo-Afghan war. In his words: 'Throughout the entire period of British connection with Afghanistan, a strange moral blindness clouded the vision of our statesmen: they saw only the natural, the inevitable results of their own measures, and forgot that those measures were the dragon's teeth from which sprung

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up the armed men'.^[4] Works such as *The Afghan Way of War* help us to go beyond these façades. The existing literature is all the richer for it.

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[1] Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010), 1-2.

[2] Lionel James, *The Indian Frontier War: Being an Account of the Mohmand and Tirah Expeditions 1897* (London: William Heinemann, 5).

[3] James Belich, *The New Zealand Wars and the Victorian Interpretation of Racial Conflict* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1987).

[4] John William Kaye, *History of the War in Afghanistan, Volume 1* (London: Richard Bentley, 1857), 403.