
Humanitarian Invasion: Global Development in Cold War Afghanistan

By Timothy Nunan, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016. Pp. 336, Hardback £64.99, ISBN: 978-1107112070

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Historians have typically opened discussions about Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion and occupation with a narrative about the flight into Kabul. Nunan opens his book in a similar fashion, except he tells of the arrival of a Soviet journalist, a plane full of Soviet party workers and development experts, and their ambitions for the future of Afghanistan. This opening narrative is used to frame the discussion around neither the political and diplomatic intricacies of the war, nor the story of the *mujahidin* and their efforts. Instead, the book focuses on a handful of themes – such as development, humanitarian and international actors and their ideas and images of Afghanistan, communism in Afghanistan, gender and feminism, sovereignty, and borders – by examining the relationships between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union, NGOs, and the international scene. By approaching Afghanistan and the Soviet invasion from a development framework and historiography, Nunan attempts to demonstrate the immense influence both the Soviet Union and NGOs had within the nation; as well as the lack of control of the outcome these same institutions had in implementing their ideas and programs. Effectively, he challenges the idea that Afghanistan was a graveyard for empires; rather, it was a graveyard for the ‘Third World’.

The book is broken into seven sections. Nunan begins with the historiographical traditions and problems that have plagued historical narratives of Afghanistan and Central Asia during the Cold War. The second section discusses Soviet, West German, and American development projects. Differences between the three projects not only demonstrate the diversity and plethora of ideas that entered Afghanistan in the 1950s, but also the eerily similar methods used to justify ‘Western’ and ‘Eastern development’. The third section introduces the conflict between Soviet attempts at societal transformation through education and humanitarian efforts. Nunan suggests that the “Soviet global project destroyed states within borders; humanitarian actors crossed borders in order to challenge illiberal state functions.” (p.120) He attempts to further this discussion by including the difficulties faced by Komsomol programs due to a lack of interest in local issues by Komsomol and Soviets experts and the steady alienation of religious and local leaders. Eventually, this general discussion about the conflict between two images of the

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world comes to a head in the fifth section with an examination of the debate on women's rights and feminism. Here, Nunan argues that "the insistence on politics at the cost of morality turned Afghan women into a male factory worker; the insistence on morality at the cost of politics turned her into a victim." (p.206) Thus, Nunan demonstrates that, within the Cold War context, Afghan women were used as tools to further both socialist development and humanitarian interventions, depending on the goals of local political actors. However, as he convincingly shows, this does not mean that one can ignore the local issues that these women were advocating.

These arguments and ideas are brought together in the final two sections which discuss the lack of borders, or, in some cases, the extreme rigidity caused by fluctuating borders. This discussion begins with the deployment of Soviet Border Forces within Afghanistan and the problems facing local Afghans, Soviet soldiers, humanitarian NGOs, and the *mujahidin* that encountered a fluid border situation inside Afghanistan. Instead of confronting the reality of a 'leaky' border, both the Soviets and NGOs entered into a state of denial by relying on their ideas of nation-states; thus causing their missions and ideas to fail in the face of war and local Afghan interpretations. These failures and the inability to cope with them caused the international community to define Afghanistan as a 'failed state'. Nunan demonstrates these failures by examining the fall of Soviet control in Qandahar and the jading of NGO missions in conjunction with the ideas in the Afghan-Pakistan border region. In his final remarks, history is extended to the present, to the American involvement within Afghanistan after 9/11 and the American idea that 'failed states' are the greatest security threat to the 'free world.' Nunan does not end on that note, since most of his book revolves around Soviet and humanitarian NGO interventions into Afghanistan. He concludes by stating that "the dreams of development, humanitarianism, and Russian power in the world together form an indelible part of Afghanistan's past, but they have become our shared future." (p.285) Thus, for Nunan, the developmental history of Afghanistan and the appeared failures of the developmental approach remain vital in any present-day discussion surrounding Afghanistan.

These conclusions are based on extensive archival research, oral histories with former Soviet experts and leaders, and former NGO professionals, and bounds of non-Anglophone secondary sources. With Nunan's first-hand experience in Central Asia, the locale is not excluded. He attempts to conquer his biases and approach the local on their own terms by narrating their daily experiences. Nevertheless, local Afghan accounts are sparse. With only a handful of local testimonies, the book reads, at times, like a Western attempt to delegitimize the Soviet ideas and schemes for development and the 'Third World.' However, in Nunan's defense, he states that "security conditions and politics of memory in Afghanistan make sustained in-country research challenging." (p.14) Although that caveat

does not exonerate the lack of Afghan testimonies, the current political status of Afghanistan opens future opportunities to fill the oral testimonial hole within Nunan's book.

Simultaneously, Nunan unexpectedly presents the political and present-day issues with researching history in both a global and development context. Due to the history of development and the Cold War, 'failed states' and 'unfriendly regimes' create situations in which historians must decide how to advance their research. In Nunan's case, he continued his work and visited Central Asian, Russian, and Indian archives, in addition to interviewing local people while he was in-country. By not allowing 'failed state' diplomacy and politics to hinder academic research, he manages to bring a nuanced approach to the historiography of development and Afghanistan. Rather than a graveyard for empires, Afghanistan was a laboratory where Soviet, humanitarian, and Western world views were challenged and permanently reshaped. Afghanistan influenced the world in which we live in today in more ways than 'producing' terrorism and the concept of a 'failed state'.