



A Military History of Afghanistan: From the Great Game to the Global War on Terror by Ali Ahmad Jalali.

Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 2017. Pp. xvi, 617. ISBN 978-0-7006-2407-2.

Review by Ken Reynolds, Ottawa, ON (militaryhistorian@gmail.com).

Historian Ali Ahmad Jalali (Nat'l. Defense Univ.) has published several monographs on Afghan military history, served with the Afghan army in the 1960s and 1970s and with the anti-Soviet resistance in the 1980s, and was a minister in the post-Taliban Afghan government. He states in the introduction of his latest book that “Military history is virtually the history of Afghanistan—a country that has been constantly drawn into armed conflicts in response to foreign invasions or in support of its own conquests in foreign lands. Violent reaction to foreign invasions has become the hallmark of Afghanistan’s military history” (xi).

Jalali argues that the fighting in Afghanistan since 2001 has “spurred renewed interest” in the military history of Afghanistan and the Afghan way of war. He criticizes some of that literature because, in their “zeal ... to find easy and all-inclusive ‘truths’ about the military culture of the Afghans, some analysts hastily presented concepts based on stereotypes, generalizations, anachronist judgments, and geographic misplacements.” He calls the bromide that Afghanistan is “the graveyard of empires” “erroneous [and] far from being a comprehensive portrayal of the way of war pursued by both state and nonstate actors in Afghanistan against different domestic and foreign enemies, under changing sociopolitical and technological conditions at different times and different places” (xi).

Jalali’s primary argument is that three unique factors shaped Afghanistan’s military history: “a distinct geography unsuitable for large invading armies and difficult to sustain logistically; the decentralized sociopolitical order of self-relying local communities; and the multiplicity of military institutions within a social system imbued with military pluralism” (xvi).

The book proceeds chronologically, except for chapter 1, which deals with geographic context. Chapters 2–8 cover antiquity to 1929, and chapters 9–13 the Cold War, the Soviet invasion and occupation, the civil war and Taliban regime, the fall of the Taliban, and the early years of the current regime (2001–15). Jalali draws on numerous interviews, official correspondence, news reports, and a large body of published books and articles¹—the latter conveniently listed according to era in his bibliography.

Chapter 1 is devoted to the effects of geography on political and social developments in Afghanistan in light of the great economic, demographic, and religious differences between various regions. More important, the country straddles

the converging space and dividing verges of Central Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia with historical connections to China. Its identity as a state is based less on geography and more on history. Throughout its long history the country has served as the buffer between expanding empires or the collision space between competing regional powers. (5)

1. Including works in Dari (Afghan) Persian, the official language of Afghanistan, and other, regional languages.

Chapter 2, “Highlights of the Past,” concerns the period from antiquity to the appearance of a recognizable Afghan state. This was an era of constant conflict between “migrating hordes and the natives,” “settled communities [and] ... nomads,” and people of different religions. Jalali describes the campaign of Alexander the Great and subsequent Greek influence, the coming of Islam to the region, the eras of the Mongol Horde and Tamerlane, and the emergence of the modern nation under Ahmad Shah Durrani.

Chapter 3, on 1809–39, summarizes the origins of “Great Game,” that is, “strategic competition and conflict” (79) between the British and Russian empires for supremacy in Central Asia. Russian-supported Persian military advances into Afghanistan and Russian diplomatic maneuvers to bring the Afghan government to its side in the “game” led the British to occupy Afghanistan militarily and install new leadership in Kabul.

Jalali notes at the start of chapter 4, on 1839–42, that it “is often said that for any invader it is easy to enter Afghanistan but hard to leave” (117). A case in point was the First Anglo-Afghan War, in which Britain’s diplomatic and political failures led to the ultimate defeat of its military forces. Chapter 5, on 1842–79, continues the story of Afghan national consolidation in the face of British diplomatic and political efforts that eventually precipitated the Second Anglo-Afghan War in 1879. Chapter 6, on 1879–81, completes the account of that war, which concluded Britain’s struggles to retain control of Afghan national policies and secure British India’s border with Afghanistan.

As described in chapter 7, the years 1880–1919 were a “period of uneasy peace” (262), as Afghan authorities strove to break free of Britain’s remaining control, especially in foreign affairs. The Afghan nation, continuing to solidify its position, won the Third Anglo-Afghan War in 1919, gaining formal recognition of its independence and an end to British interference in its external affairs.

Chapter 8 concerns developments in 1919–29, including the civil war, while chapter 9, on 1929–79, covers the military development of the nation in the 1930s and 1940s, the impact of the creation of Pakistan, the effects of the Cold War, the communist overthrow of the monarchy, and the Soviet invasion of the country.

On April 27, 1978, a bloody coup staged by Afghan army and air force officers affiliated with the Khalq faction of the PDPA [People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan] opened the most destructive and violent chapter in Afghanistan’s history, which has yet to close. The chain of events leading up to the coup and the poorly coordinated takeover indicate that it was a last-minute ad hoc operation. On April 17, 1978, a prominent member of the Parcham faction of the PDPA, Mir Akbar Khaiber, was assassinated near his home under suspicious circumstances. The Communists accused the government of the murder, charging that President [Mohammad] Daud [Khan’s] regime was bent on eliminating them all. There are other speculations that Khaiber was assassinated by the rival Khalqis or elements interested in provoking a confrontation between the Communists and the Daud regime. The funeral of Khaiber turned into a massive antiregime protest and a political statement of defiance. (353)

Chapter 10 turns to the Soviet occupation and subsequent Afghan uprising (1979–89). The author elucidates political, strategic, and military aspects of the conflict from both Soviet and Afghan perspectives, stressing three “major combined operations”: in the Panjsher Valley (1982–83), at Zhawar Base (1985–86), and during Operation Magistral (1987).

Chapter 11 concerns the Afghan civil war and the rise of the Taliban (1989–2001), providing context and a meticulous discussion of military organization and operations. The American-led invasion, the fall of the Taliban, and the efforts to create a new Afghan government are examined in chapter 12, on 2001–5. The concluding thirteenth chapter addresses geopolitical and internal

policies and military matters. Jalali also recaps post-2005 events, criticizing recent diplomatic, political, counternarcotic, and counterinsurgency efforts and speculating on future developments.

Ali Ahmad Jalali has now written the most comprehensive English-language study of Afghan military history. And he has managed to make his dense, virtually encyclopedic account more intelligible by consistently highlighting certain guiding themes. I heartily recommend *A Military History of Afghanistan* to anyone with a serious interest in Afghan military affairs past and present.