

Invisible History

Afghanistan's Untold Story

by Paul Fitzgerald and Elizabeth Gould

City Lights Books
San Francisco

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Text design: Gambrinus

Cover Photograph of the Karta-i-Sakhi neighborhood in Western Kabul by Anja Håvedal

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Fitzgerald, Paul.

Invisible history : Afghanistan's untold story / by Paul Fitzgerald and Elizabeth Gould.

p. cm.

ISBN-13: 978-0-87286-494-8

ISBN-10: 0-87286-494-4

1. Afghanistan—History. 2. Afghanistan—Politics and government. I. Gould, Elizabeth. II. Title.

DS357.5.F58 2009

958.1—dc22

2008020486

City Lights Books are published at the City Lights Bookstore,

261 Columbus Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94133.

Visit our Web site: www.citylights.com

This book is dedicated to Sima Wali and to her dream of a new Afghanistan becoming a reality.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Afghanistan has been with us so long, it would take a separate book to list all the people who helped along the way. We owe a debt of gratitude to City Lights Books and especially to our editor Greg Ruggiero, who shared our vision and whose thoughtful guidance shepherded this project through its myriad stages. And to Noam Chomsky, whose wisdom and encouragement over many years kept our effort alive. We would also like to express our thanks to the one man, without whose help this book and our thirty-year journey would never have begun.

When the entire western press corps was expelled from Afghanistan following the Soviet invasion, we saw the chance to tell a story hidden from the eyes of the world. Not the Cold War story that force-fit the conflict into the Manichean terms of superpower confrontation as directed from Moscow and Washington, but the story of Afghanistan as seen from Afghan eyes.

In the fall of 1980 we approached Mohammed Farid Zarif, charge d'affaires of the Afghan mission at the United Nations for the much-coveted "first" visas to enter Afghanistan. Zarif accepted our explanation that the news blackout made for wild speculation and that Afghanistan needed its own story told. Zarif understood that we would bring the story to the very networks his government had expelled. But even with that precondition, he accepted our word that we would go with an open mind and with no preconceived notions about the crisis his country was in.

Zarif presented our case to the authorities in Kabul and six months later we got the call that the visas were on their way.

In the end, a story about our experience wound up on the CBS Evening News with Dan Rather, but the real story that we discovered about Afghanistan had to wait. For nearly thirty years we have gathered as many of the stories and diverse views as we could find and put them together into one volume. But that original Afghanistan that was opened to us by this one man, who wanted the story of his country told, remains the foundation of an experience that changed our lives forever.

—Paul Fitzgerald and Elizabeth Gould

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Introduction

by Sima Wali

Invisible History: Afghanistan's Untold Story is a phenomenal compendium of history, research and critical analysis of the complex dynamics that has led to the death of my home country Afghanistan—a nation as old as history itself. For Afghanistan, the aftermath of the Cold War resulted in large-scale genocide of more than two million civilians and five million war victims, as well as a million handicapped and scores of internally displaced Afghan people.

Before I met Paul and Liz I had spent two decades seeking an explanation for why Afghanistan was sacrificed in the war against the Soviet Union. *Invisible History* unravels this great mystery as it bears testimony for all humanity about one of the great invisible injustices of our time.

I fled Afghanistan for the United States in 1978 after the first Marxist coup overthrew the last member of a dynasty that had ruled my country for nearly 250 years. During that time my family was put under house arrest simply because, as allies to the West, we were on the wrong side of Afghan politics. In my youth my family was very close to the Americans. We admired them. We all believed they shared with us a vision of a greater Afghanistan, where men and women could share in a bright future through education, cultural exchange and economic development. Despite the many obstacles inherent in moving an underdeveloped country like Afghanistan into the twentieth century, it was a time of hope, enthusiasm and promise. Kabul was a peaceful international city then with ancient ties to the East and the West. Tourists flocked from all over the world, especially from the Middle East, to enjoy a cosmopolitan Islamic culture, free from the strictures of extremism.

When I was forced to flee Afghanistan, I left behind that era and a culture that was striving on the path of democracy. It had been a golden era, where the voices of empowered women were heard and recognized by their male counterparts as legitimate and necessary to the development of our country. Back then I was accustomed to the visibility and contributions of women in the Afghan democracy. I was exposed to empowered women in my own immediate family and the larger society who held cabinet posts and worked alongside men in the government. I promised to remain a voice for these people, and I dedicated myself to their memory. I still grieve for the Afghanistan I left behind and the lost opportunities for the democratic-minded Afghan people.

In 1981 I established Refugee Women in Development (RefWID), an international nonprofit tax exempt organization dedicated to helping the world's displaced women and victims of war and genocide make a new way of life for themselves. For twenty-five years my colleagues and I worked to empower women who were affected by major socio-political transformations such as war, civil strife and human rights abuses. From our offices in Washington, D.C. we supported war-affected women and their male

counterparts by building their leadership capacities in the nongovernmental sector (NGOs). We conducted our work by providing training, networking and advocacy support to enable local NGOs to provide better services in their communities. Although we worked primarily with women, we also included men in our programs. Our aim was to build the capacities of women to organize their communities and to fully participate in the rebuilding process. By empowering these women and men to reestablish their own shattered lives, Refugee Women in Development helped set the stage for a reconstructed, functioning civil society.

For the twenty years preceding the downfall of the Taliban, Refugee Women in Development was unable to conduct its program inside Afghanistan. Most of our programs were centered in Pakistan. There, I listened to the voices of hundreds of increasingly desperate men and women. I anguished over how to explain what I learned—that despite the growing awareness of the total destruction of the war, the Afghan people were mostly absent from campaigns waged on their behalf in the United States. I realized then that this callous treatment of my people, who had served the United States in the war against the Soviet Union, would leave them vulnerable to a far more pervasive and determined enemy. That enemy emerged as the Taliban.

During my visits to Pakistan prior to 9/11, the women of Afghanistan and their male escorts braved minefields and dangerous mountain passes to secretly meet with me. I listened to the voices of the Afghan women who ran schools, provided health services and conducted human rights activities while providing social services to Afghans inside Afghanistan and Pakistan. Traumatized and desperate, they constantly spoke of severe poverty, suicide and the growing hopelessness that saw their dreams for a free Afghanistan swallowed by an army of Islamist mercenaries from all over the world armed and supplied by Pakistan. How did the world community allow such heinous crimes to be committed against a nation of twenty-six million people with a large majority of women?

I still hear their cries. During this entire time I carried with me their pleading voices and ultimately their screams, while the world looked away. Now, as we conclude still another decade of war, their screams rise again within me as I witness a Taliban resurgence. The draconian Taliban rule stripped women of their basic human rights. Their edicts against women in Afghanistan led to an introduction of a new form of violence termed “gender apartheid.” Strict limitations on women’s public space and education led to the galvanization of American women on behalf of Afghan women. This worldwide solidarity with the most oppressed women in the world itself was novel. From that day on, the women’s alliance across the globe and their influence on foreign policy was seen as a new and powerful factor in the resolution of the worldwide refugee problem. I can safely state that Afghan women were the canaries in the mineshaft, bearing witness to the inhumanity of a regime against its own citizens.

Still, in the United States today there remains a profound lack of understanding about the Taliban, what political forces they represent and what their objectives are. The void of accurate historical information on their origins has resulted in a succession of dangerous, counterproductive policy initiatives from Washington. The consequences of these initiatives have negated any chance for a successful restoration of an Afghan republic, opened Afghanistan to cross-border raids from Pakistan while at the same time providing a platform for the resurgence of the Taliban.

When the Americans washed their hands of Afghanistan once the Soviets were defeated, many desperate Afghans living in Pakistan became indoctrinated into the Taliban’s fundamentalist mentality. Due to the dismal economic conditions following the war, many young Afghan men were either forcibly recruited or voluntarily joined the Taliban out of desperation. Over the years as I witnessed the continuing breakdown of civil society due to the long term effects of war on the Afghan people, I also witnessed the growth of the madrassa system of fundamentalist education in Pakistan. While I was in Pakistan, Afghan refugee families—with few options to care for their children—confirmed to me that the only way for their

boys to receive education was through the madrassas. During that time, the Taliban's influence grew over the Afghan refugees in Peshawar as well as across the border into Afghanistan as the war continued to drain all resources required to maintain civil society. Encouraged by Pakistan but apparently "overlooked" by the Americans, these Pakistani madrassas continued to provide the major source of indoctrination and recruitment for the Taliban and grew stronger by the day.

To set the record straight, the term "Taliban" and the movement itself were unheard of in Afghanistan until 1996. Prior to the Soviet invasion, the Taliban mentality and the madrassa structure did not exist. As an invention of Pakistan's military intelligence with outside help, the Taliban were not recruited from inside Afghanistan but from Pakistani madrassas. This process was funded, not by Afghans, but by the Saudis and other Arab countries who continue to seek the longterm goal of a political and religious transformation of South Asia combined with the dissolution of Afghanistan as a nation state. As Zalmay Khalizad said in his April 1, 2004 remarks at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), historically the version of Islam practiced by Afghans was moderate. The Taliban version of Deobandi Islam practiced in Pakistan and the Wahhabism practiced in Saudi Arabia were both alien to Afghan practice. Suicide bombings did not exist in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation nor even when the Taliban arrived in 1996. The Afghan people never willingly embraced extremist Islam. These ideas were forced upon them under circumstances beyond their control.

Regardless of these understandings, during the debates establishing the post-Taliban government for Afghanistan in 2001, Islamist principles that had never been considered Afghan and were never a part of previous Afghan constitutions were infused into the new constitution. Even the chief justice and the ministry of justice are composed of former Taliban madrassa students. Many in leadership positions in the current government of Afghanistan also subscribe to extremist ideologies of the Islamic kind that were never a part of Afghan politics. And so, where in the past, extremism held little sway within the political process, the conflict between moderates and extremists has now become the norm.

Years after being driven from power by the American military intervention of 2001, today the Taliban enemy is once again reemerging as a tenacious and relentless insurgent force. But even with a military occupation that has lasted more than seven years, the United States and the West in general, do not perceive that their failure in Afghanistan remains a direct result of the long-standing inability of western institutions to adjust to the realities of what needs to be done. It is also a result of the failure to listen to the voices of the vast majority of willing Afghans who are capable of ushering in democratic change. This is a bias that permeated American thinking before September 11, 2001. Unfortunately, despite a wealth of new and empirical evidence, misconceptions about Afghanistan remains in place today.

Following the fall of the Taliban, our central effort was to build a democratic civil society in Afghanistan. Our basic philosophy at Refugee Women in Development has been that the grassroots leadership found in local NGOs play a vital role in promoting a balanced, tolerant, and open society. We developed training programs and networking opportunities for local Afghan organizations by strengthening their institutional and leadership capacities through training programs.

At first we were confident that with a combination of American aid and security, the civil society that I had known in Afghanistan could be restored and expanded throughout the country. This was not to be.

Today, Afghanistan is again depicted in the worst possible light—as a haven for extremists who have hijacked Afghan cultural and religious traditions. The media often promote this misconception, and fail to recognize that the Afghan people have themselves been held hostage to external invading forces. These forces have a vested interest in keeping Afghanistan destabilized and weak. They also have a vested interest in maintaining misconceptions about Afghanistan that prevent the country from getting enough western commitment to realistically establish democratic institutions. The international system of law and diplomacy broke down once over Afghanistan. It must not be allowed to break down again.

Following 9/11 we temporarily had the semblance of a new society, but the Afghan people are yet again seeing the glimmer of hope rapidly dissipate. Although 9/11 was a wake-up call, the realization that events in Afghanistan are directly tied to security in the United States is clouded by a profound misunderstanding.

I no longer fear that Afghanistan will again be abandoned. My fear today is that despite all the initial good intentions, America's overreliance on military methods, targeted missile strikes, chemical spraying, and imprisoning and torturing suspected militants has turned popular opinion in the wrong direction. Combined with an inability to improve the lives of the average Afghan by even a small measure, America is now viewed as an occupier, instead of the friend and ally we want her to be.

While many strides have been made to bring women along in reconstruction schemes, today these advances are tempered by rampant poverty, violence, and lack of water, electricity, and employment among other things. Under current circumstances women are abducted, even jailed, for refusing to accept forced marriages. Honor killings continue and sexual and physical violence have not been adequately addressed especially in the provinces where warlords rule.

Today, the common Afghan man and woman have fear in their hearts and uncertainty about their future.

Although we now have a new constitution in place that guarantees the rights of both men and women, the advances are tempered by rising repression of women's social and political prominence. We, as women, are at peril of anti-modernist forces that are committed to rolling back the newfound gains of Afghan women by hijacking our language and by resorting to the so-called "Islamic" argument. The protection of women as equal citizens does not figure prominently under the new constitution. After having suffered flagrant abuses for more than two decades we cannot and will not stand for unequal protection under the highest law of our nation.

The world community must not be acquiescent with rhetoric, tokenism, or symbolic assurances. What Afghanistan and its people desperately need at this critical juncture is not misplaced charity but long-term strategies for sustainable democracy. This can only be done if the international community makes a permanent commitment to: 1) staying the course of nation building; 2) committing enough finances to sustain long-term development; 3) heeding the voices of the Afghan people especially the moderate Afghans; and 4) involving ever-increasing numbers of women. Afghan women constitute 67 percent of the Afghan population. Building a ravaged nation with only 33 percent of its human resources is simply not sound economics.

As we approach the second decade of the twenty-first century, the world community and especially the United States realize that Afghanistan is a country of very special interest. But despite the West's commitment to Afghanistan it still remains a country whose history and struggle for democracy is largely obscured by myth and propaganda.

In the pages ahead Paul Fitzgerald and Elizabeth Gould clarify and correct the record, and build a foundation upon which the whole story of Afghanistan's past can be appreciated.

It takes courageous hearts, minds and souls to travel the path that Paul and Liz have pursued—particularly for Afghans who have endured and continue to endure unspeakable trauma. Witnessing the massacre of members of my extended family has altered my life and has been the driving force in my quest to inform the world of the insanity in the current war. To this day, I am exposed to the impact this war has on women, men and children, and bear witness to their families' lifelong trauma. It has led me to question why anyone or any institution can claim the right to sacrifice innocent victims while pursuing their own political agendas and economic interests.

Invisible History is filled with ground-breaking analysis, not only for those interested in the more recent politics of Afghanistan, but also for those wanting the larger historical context necessary to grasp

the immensity of this tragedy. It will stand as a twenty-first century guide not only to what was lost in the destruction of Afghanistan but to what can still be done to reconstruct a future where all Afghan women and men can live with the peace and plenty they deserve. I commend Paul and Liz for their dedication, courage and professionalism in treading in areas where no soul has dared venture before and in unraveling the complex dynamics of the story of Afghanistan.