

Tariq Ali, *The Forty-Year War in Afghanistan: A Chronicle Foretold* (London: Verso, 2022) 244 pp. Paperback \$25.95.

According to its subtitle, Tariq Ali's *The Forty-Year War in Afghanistan* is "a chronicle foretold" of the multi-dimensional violence that has plagued that country since well before the 1979 Soviet invasion. It consists of a series of politically engaged essays written over twenty years that work to recontextualize the meaning, significance, and implications of western and Soviet intervention in—and occupation of—that almost singularly unfortunate country. Ali, who remains a member of the *New Left Review* Editorial Committee, is never at a loss for words. *The Forty-Year War* is prescient, insightful, and far more sophisticated than most standard treatments of war in Afghanistan. For instance, almost as soon as the Taliban had been deposed, Ali argued that the US and its allies could not win the war. By 2011, he had become even more convinced and to look for other ways to build a stable state and civil society in that country. What is more, with the military backing of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and financial support of the governing institutions in the Global North, the Western maintenance of the Karzai, then Ghani regimes prompted an extended endgame and gradual demise that produced a series of deeply disconcerting effects that seriously destabilized Pakistan as well. To the best of my knowledge, Ali has no special powers of foresight. Instead, what he has is an effective way of analysing imperialism and a perspective that makes visible its broad range of effects. *The Forty-Year War* looks to make three key points.

First, Soviet strategy in Afghanistan—like the subsequent American approach—was doomed to failure. Western assessments of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan treat it simply as imperialism. Ali ultimately accepts this argument even while he looks to approach this subject from a different direction. Ali notes that Soviet policy back to Lenin rejected the viability of military intervention in Afghanistan. The decision to invade Afghanistan was a poor decision, made in haste, a matter he says was recognized by Soviet intellectuals. The Afghanistan communist regime was deeply internally divided, looking for a "short cut" to socialism and lacked mass support. Ali's main take away is a key theme of his book. Military action is not "an effective instrument for achieving social change" (20-1). In this case, its effect was catastrophic. Soviet intervention transformed a civil war into jihad and contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union. The extended conflict laid the groundwork for the Taliban (supported by Pakistan and initially the United States) and what Ali calls a form of "deracinated fanaticism" (31) that ultimately contributed to an internationalized political destabilization affecting Egypt, the Sudan, Pakistan, Russia, and Algeria, among other states.

Second, the American and NATO occupation of Afghanistan could like-

wise never succeed. It was compromised from the beginning. The Northern Alliance was never a viable political alternative, the Karzai regime constituted a puppet government sustained by foreign occupation, American and NATO objectives were never clear, and whatever other aims they may have had were married to “a crude war of revenge” (64). In this context, state and civil society degenerated into a perverse gangster regime built on corruption, the drug trade, and misappropriated international aid. This had the effect of shifting popular perceptions in Afghanistan. If there was initially some support for a police action against the Taliban regime, there was no desire for—and much opposition to—long-term occupation sustaining a corrupt and unpopular regime. This led to the rise of what Ali calls a “neo-Taliban” whose aim was more national liberation than the export of politicized Islam.

Third, Ali believes that the history of the Afghanistan conflict tells us a great deal about the character of contemporary imperialist war. The conflict in Afghanistan was not new. It dated to the nineteenth century and British efforts to subdue that region. Other characteristics of contemporary imperialist wars include: media distortions which suggested the war could be—and was being—won, the cruelty and savagery of drone strikes, the inability of imperialist powers to confine conflict to a single country, and the pointlessness of occupation, its lack of clear and defined objectives or a means to attain them. Finally, and what is perhaps most important to Ali, is the early recourse of imperialist powers to war and occupation. This blinded both the Soviet and then American governments to potential alternatives and, to be sure, Ali believes that there were alternatives that could have led history in a dramatically different direction.

From an historical perspective, this is an important point. Here, Ali deploys a counterfactual history that does not allow for clairvoyance, but which does generate a potentially useable leftist history. What was possible in Afghanistan, for the Soviets and then for the United States and its NATO allies? Ali cannot be specific, but on a general level: political and social stability, economic reform, and at least modest democratization. Considering the forty years of conflict Afghanistan has endured, this is a list to be envied. What would have made it possible? For the Soviets, a different approach to socialism that recognized and proceeded from the character of Afghanistan’s civil society. For the United States, it would have required a quick exit from the country and a willingness to work with a true multinational cohort that would have included China and Iran, as well as Pakistan, to ensure peace and develop state infrastructure while creating a viable economy. This clearly did not happen and from our current perspective, it may even seem like an odd—potentially even fanciful—argument. Yet, one might argue that it is only the perspective created by our own historical juncture that leads us to forget what could have been possible in even the recent past.

I will confess that I like this argument. I like it because it forces us to think about what we can and should learn from the history of contemporary imperialism, how supposedly unforeseen implications can be foreseen, and what opportunities

are made possible—and what ones are elided—by the real political-economic circumstances of contemporary international relations. *The Forty-Year War in Afghanistan* is history written with purpose. I suspect that the current context of international politics now, more than ever, requires this kind of clear analysis.

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