

The Man Outside: The Problem with the External Perception of Afghanistan in Historical Sources

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Summary

The article aims to unravel the biases of those sources relating to modern Afghan history, which were written by foreigners. In fact, these make up the bulk of the available source material. The recurring attitudes range from colonial chauvinism to a perpetuated myth of Afghanistan as the last bastion of the wild and uncivilized East, which successfully fought off two European colonial powers in the 19th century. Also the allure of plain exoticism is echoing in many historical sources. It is attempted to show as an impressionistic sketch, by citing freely from textual and graphic material, the distorted perspective of these historical records. This may help to understand some of the prejudices which are often found in the literature on Afghanistan and which thus strongly influence still today how we perceive the country at the Hindu Kush and its culture.

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I Introduction: Identity, history and the problem with the external perspective

Nation-building is a key topic in the current development discourse on Afghanistan, and thus the "national" identity of Afghans is back on the agenda. Seeing as common culture and language can hardly serve as parameters for this identity in the case of the proverbial "land at the crossroads of Asia", it is primarily their common historical experience that unites the country's multiple ethnic groups. This history basically stretches over the last two and a half centuries, starting with the foundation of the Durrani Empire in 1747.

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