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Art as a Form of Therapy: Afghan Women and their “War Rugs” Highlight the Trauma and Violence of the Soviet-Afghan War

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Art as a Form of Therapy: Afghan Women and their “War Rugs” Highlight the Trauma and Violence of the Soviet-Afghan War

by
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HIS 490 History Honors Thesis

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INTRODUCTION

The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan began with the Soviet invasion of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan in December 1979. The Soviet Union sent thousands of troops to assume total military and political control of Kabul and other large portions of the country. Previously exiled Babrak Karmal, the leader of the Parcham faction of the Marxist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), was installed as Afghanistan's new head of government. The government's fall was preceded by ten years of war, during which the United States and other nations supported the mujahideen "freedom fighters" who fought against the Soviet invaders. The communist faction in Kabul struggled to maintain its dominance against the threat of the mujahideen. The Soviets themselves pursued this war with unattainable goals and inadequate preparedness. This Soviet puppet government began to crumble in 1987 with the introduction of American shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missiles, leading to the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989. The totality of this conflict is known as the Soviet-Afghan War.

The conditions of this conflict prompted impoverished Afghan women to incorporate symbols of warfare into their woven textiles, which became known as war rugs. War rugs and the messages they convey regarding the suffering of Afghan women demonstrate the significance of material culture research as a field. The discipline of material culture studies is propelled by individuals fascinated with the explanatory potential of material evidence for cultural meaning. Historians and other academics have long argued that written evidence is a more effective resource for understanding the past and the present. Material culture, however, is a tangible form

of the past persisting in the present, allowing researchers to explore human behavior over a much wider arc of cultural change than written records alone. War rugs are elements of material culture, and as such, reveal the complicated experiences of Afghan women during the Soviet-Afghan War. Weaving is one of humanity's most significant technological advancements. This craft is labor-intensive and requires expertise on the part of the weaver. The degree of technicality involved in carpet weaving signifies Afghan women's commitment to telling their stories through art. Experts on Afghan women during the Soviet occupation have revealed that the war rugs reflect their unique experience of this armed conflict. It is important to consider the context in which individuals look to ancient cultural practices to retain a sense of continuity, especially as war alters the world in front of them. The lens of material culture research allows historians to draw conclusions about the motives of Afghan women in crafting their war rugs. As creators of war rugs, Afghan women preserve the cultural history of Afghanistan through their art.

Scholars on material culture, such as William Charland, attest to the importance of analyzing cultural artifacts when retelling historical events. Charland studies war rugs and women's history to demonstrate that the persistence of art and other mediums of expression in war-torn societies has been a key theme throughout history. He contends that "war rugs are created by 'survivor artists…driven by the twin needs of subsistence and self-expression.'"[1] These war rugs prove that war is a defining activity in any society, constituting a key theme for artists through the centuries. War rugs also shed light on the unique experiences of Afghan women during the Soviet occupation, specifically in terms of the harsh conditions and relentless oppression they faced. Similar endeavors have been undertaken by scholars like Ayesha Khan,

[1] William Charland, "War Rugs: Woven Documents of Conflict and Hope," *Art Education* 64, no. 6 (2011): 28.

who retells the experiences of Afghan women primarily using testimony from oral history projects. Khan argues that Afghan women's "experience was more complex and their strategies for survival more elusive to outside understanding than the media portrayed," although they have "predominantly been represented in international media as victims of trauma, passive recipients of foreign aid."[2] Khan insists that despite women's hardships, their voices were not heard among mujahideen leaders and intervening Western powers.

Blending material culture research, women's studies, wartime history, and oral history, my thesis makes a unique contribution to this field using an interdisciplinary approach. As such, my project addresses a gap in scholarship on women by examining war rugs as windows into their experiences and perceptions as victims of the Soviet-Afghan War. Highlighting the trauma Afghan women refugees incurred and their efforts to use carpet weaving as a therapeutic outlet will demonstrate that women's perspectives are vital contributions to history. My position is an amalgamation of Charland and Khan's respective works, building on their previous scholarship by contributing my interdisciplinary perspective. Charland analyzes war rugs and Afghan women's history while Khan retells the struggles of Afghan refugee women through their oral histories; however, these authors do not put these studies in conversation with one another as I attempt to do in this project. My unique contribution to this field consists of combining these elements to convey a more complete picture of Afghan women's experiences during and after the Soviet-Afghan War.

Some scholars point to the existence of a "trauma market" to undermine claims that war rugs represent the lived experiences of Afghan women in foreign refugee camps. This "trauma market" is a ploy in which middlemen intervene in the rugmaking process, guiding women

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[2] Ayesha Khan, "Afghan Refugee Women's Experience of Conflict and Disintegration," *Meridians* 3, no. 1 (2002): 96.

weavers and stealing much of their profits. As Jamal J. Elias notes, this framework succeeds because global consumers are intrigued by war victims' experiences and desire to purchase their artisanal products.[3] In some cases, the opinions of these scholars are true. There are instances in which the "trauma market" does exist; however, to contend that all Afghan women weavers are subjected to the exploitation of middlemen is to make a sweeping generalization. The United Nations (UN) and other international organizations have worked to support the rights of Afghan women in refugee camps and have provided materials and centers for weaving. UN intervention gives women weavers agency over their craft and ensures they receive the profits of their labor. Overall, this "trauma market" claim does not negate the lived experiences of Afghan women during the Soviet-Afghan War. My research supports the fact that these women are working through their trauma when constructing war rugs. An extensive range of oral histories indicates that Afghan women endured true violence and oppression in refugee camps in Pakistan and Iran. War rugs are thus a means of economic survival and a form of therapy, and the general claim to the existence of a "trauma market" is unconvincing given my evidence.

Afghan women courageously endured the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan between 1979 and 1989, surviving in the face of disintegrating support systems. They created art in the form of woven rugs to reflect on their wartime experiences and cope with their trauma. These war rugs contribute to our understanding of the unique way in which women experience the dangers of modern warfare. Women, particularly mothers, played an integral role in the survival of Afghanistan during the Soviet-Afghan War; however, their efforts are often overshadowed by domineering male voices and undermined by the general lack of coverage of Afghan women in the media and in academic scholarship. Indeed, the histories shared by Afghan women

[3] Jamal J. Elias, "Afghanistan's War Rug Industry Distorts the Reality of Everyday Trauma," The Conversation, September 21, 2021; 1.

underscore the harshness they faced in their effort to protect themselves and their families in the absence of male familial figures. Cast off to refugee camps in Pakistan and Iran and forced to beg for a means of subsistence, Afghan women suffered immense physical and psychological abuse. Afghan women were direct targets of gender-based violence in a society that upholds male dominance as a crucial piece of its cultural history. Their survival tactics have largely gone unnoticed given that in a patriarchal society like Afghanistan, the power to control the narrative of public history has been reserved for men. War rugs are a medium through which women can articulate their side of Afghanistan's cultural history; their stories challenge our understanding of history at this time by highlighting a new perspective relating to women's unique experience of conflict.

Understanding how women's experience of conflict is inherently different from that of men will reveal the answer to a much larger question—namely, how can the gendered nature of cultural losses be addressed? Without an inquiry into this topic, we risk misunderstanding the crucial role Afghan women played during and after the Soviet-Afghan War. Without this research project and others like it, their undeniable courage in the face of continual hardship will be lost. Afghan women deserve a much more comprehensive range of recognition for all they sacrificed during this decade-long conflict. The experiences of Afghan women are a part of history that is largely missing from scholarship on the Soviet-Afghan War and are thus the key to understanding the totality of this conflict and the gravity of its implications.

CHAPTER 1. WOMEN AND CARPET WEAVING IN CENTRAL ASIA

Uncovered in permafrost in 1949 at an archaeological tomb expedition in the Altai Mountains, the Pazyryk Carpet (Figure 1.1) is the key to understanding the significance of carpet weaving throughout the history of Central Asia. As archaeologists chiseled away at the ice encrusting the tomb of a Scythian prince in the mountainous region stretching across China, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, and Russia, they stumbled upon what would later become known as the world's oldest woven carpet. Historians estimate that the Pazyryk Carpet was created during the third or fourth century B.C.E. and hypothesize that it remained intact throughout the centuries because this burial site in the Pazyryk Valley was robbed and the tomb was left open, causing the rug to freeze. The Pazyryk Carpet was the centerpiece of a grand palace before it was buried with this Scythian prince. More importantly, this textile served as a model for future rug weaving throughout Central Asia—the kind of work in which women were traditionally involved. The Pazyryk Carpet enhances our understanding of carpet weaving as a rich and woman-centered tradition in this region.[4]

Women's Role in Carpet Weaving

Carpet-making in Central Asia has typically been dominated by women since the creation of the Pazyryk Carpet to the present day. Women, in particular, were responsible for many of the advancements made in this art form. For instance, women weavers streamlined the usage of rhythmic chants and songs during the textile-making process. Knot count sequences could be

[4] It is not certain that the Pazyryk Carpet was produced by women; however it can be assumed based on tradition.

converted to songs, which were then "committed to memory by women of any given household where patterned textiles are produced," most commonly in rural regions of Central Asia and northern India.[5] Rhythmic chants have been employed in carpet-making over time since "virtually any pattern or design that is incorporated into the weave of a textile can be reduced to numeric sequences, given the grid-like structure of warp and weft threads of a piece of cloth."[6] In their earliest form, memorized rhythmic chants granted weavers the ability to remember patterns and reproduce them as quickly as necessary. Traditional designs with increased complexity required more nuanced count sequences. The mnemonic devices used in weaving ensure that a pattern is visually and numerically symmetrical, allowing for the incorporation of singing into the overall weaving process. Songlike structures share an association with regions in which the dominant population spoke Indo-European languages. As such, they carried culturally shared technologies associated with weaving patterned textiles. Women "retained this system of textile design production, in some cases to the present day" as a result of Indo-European languages.[7] These languages, which were converted into mnemonic devices, communicated information regarding the technology and modes of production used during the weaving process.

The strength of this singing tradition contributed to the survival of certain phrases of the Indo-European language, as preferred rhythms became regulators for weaving. Rhythmically communicated number sequences related to textile making are a testament to the ingenuity of women weavers throughout history. Some scholars hypothesize that these women "sing as they weave because they share, however remotely, a textile tradition that stems from a time and

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[5] Anthony Tuck, "Singing the Rug: Patterned Textiles and the Origins of Indo-European Metrical Poetry," *American Journal of Archaeology* 110, no. 4 (2006): 540.

[6] Tuck, "Singing the Rug," 540.

[7] Tuck, "Singing the Rug," 545.

region associated with the earliest roots of the Indo-European family of languages."[8] This shared linguistic background contributed to the survival of these rhythmic chants throughout the history of Central Asia. The fact that these songs are still employed in many textile-producing regions today demonstrates the importance and continuity of women's contributions to this field.

Carpet weaving typically occurred in a gendered space, that is, a space dominated by women. More specifically, in most cases, Afghan war rugs were "hand-made woven commodities produced in the rural villages and urban workshops of Afghanistan, as well as crowded refugee camps in Iran and Pakistan."[9] Afghan women disproportionately populated these villages and refugee camps, as Afghan men typically became involved in armed conflicts. Weaving provided work for women confined to their homes and refugee camps. Even before the Soviet invasion, Afghan women who were not allowed to learn or work outside of their homes due to their tribal cultures took up carpet weaving. Moreover, once Afghan refugees returned to their home country following the conclusion of the Soviet-Afghan War in 1989, they felt "an eagerness to re-establish a sense of community…perhaps because the returnees have experienced similar tribulations."[10] During the Soviet-Afghan War, these tribulations primarily took the form of the death of male family members at the hands of the Soviets. In the modern day, Afghan women bond over their shared loss of rights and increasing oppression under the rule of the Taliban. The weaving process thus generated a space in which women share their experiences among themselves and with the world, even if they work on their carpets independently. This field also enabled them to earn money after their husbands' death or disability. Carpet weaving

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[8] Tuck, "Singing the Rug," 543.
[9] Charland, "War Rugs," 26.
[10] Thomas Lee, "The Story of Hope," *Consilience*, no. 1 (2008): 153.

was therefore most accessible to Afghan women because it arose out of economic necessity and their confinement to their homes.

Although textile production in Central Asia is a women-centered art form, there have been instances of blurred gendered labor boundaries. Notably, some Afghan men began knotting rugs in refugee camps during the Soviet occupation out of economic necessity, similar to how women in the United States took on positions previously dominated by men during World War II. These changes in workforce dynamics demonstrate that "social events—the existential threat of war—allowed deeply ingrained understandings of gender roles and expectations to become suspended or transformed."[11] Environmental and social changes can alter gender expectations in important ways. Circumstantial needs can complicate the common notion that textile making is women's work; however, since these exceptions occur typically in times of national crisis or economic desperation, the status quo of gendered labor is left relatively unchanged. While some Afghan men undermined this gendered understanding, carpet weaving remains female-dominated.

Tracing the History of Carpet Weaving in Central Asia

Woven textiles, and the dyes and materials they require, are modes of communication and expression. Visual symbols grafted into textiles reveal the social and cultural characteristics of the society they belong to. Woven artifacts are crucial for storytelling since "the fabrics used, the shapes of items of dress, dye colors, and the placement and extent of embroidery patterns" all contribute to their ability "to communicate information about the [individual], such as gender,

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[11] Charland, "War Rugs," 30.

age, sexual maturity, marital status, occupation, wealth, tribal affiliation and religious commitment."[12] As such, textiles offer a glimpse into the intimate lives of everyday people.

The intricate processes involved in constructing cultural artifacts—in this case, woven carpets from Central Asia—directly reflect the individuals who produce them. Inquiries into available technology and craft practices are necessary components of the study of textile design. For instance, research into Central Asian carpet weaving reveals that weavers are more likely to improvise, work from memory, and copy existing designs, especially in the nomadic milieu. These strategies were present throughout the region, as they were routinely adopted and refined to suit the textiles that weavers produced.

Dating back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, settlers in the mountainous regions between the Black and Caspian seas, called the Caucasus, produced embroideries and flatweaves. Flatweaves, or rugs without pile, were common across the textile-making world since "generally they are less costly and less time-consuming to make than rugs with knotted pile."[13] Flatweaves and other Caucasian textiles are, in part, the result of constant movement among settlers. "Dragon" rugs (Figure 1.2) are the oldest-known rugs from the Caucasus region, which were preserved in Turkish mosques.[14] These rugs can be traced back to Shah Abbas's rule of the Safavid Dynasty near the turn of the seventeenth century and are named for their dragon-like motifs. Shah Abbas was a proponent of economic progress, and commercial looms were established in several key cities throughout the empire. "Dragon" rugs differed from commercial nineteenth-century carpets in that they were much larger despite sharing characteristics in

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[12] Fahmida Suleman, *Textiles of the Middle East and Central Asia: The Fabric of Life* (United Kingdom: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2017): 10.

[13] Carol Bier, "Knots and Bolts: Design and Technology in the Caucasus," *Studies in the History of Art* 42 (1993): 107.

[14] Bier, "Knots and Bolts," 107.

structure and color.[15] Equally important were Caucasian pile carpets, which symbolized a blending of various design traditions. Carpet pile dictates the thickness or thinness of a given textile. Low-pile carpets are less durable and comfortable than high-pile carpets and are better suited for areas with a high volume of foot traffic. These rugs contain raised surfaces, called piles, that result when the end knots of warp and weft threads are cut off. Caucasian pile carpets (Figure 1.3) were made for everyday use in towns and villages, but they gained recognition from an international audience later on. Indeed, "beginning in the nineteenth century, Caucasian rugs were woven primarily for commercial purposes and for export. They probably represent the most distinctive design tradition of all rug-producing areas in the world."[16] Known for their bright colors and eye-catching designs, these carpets were desired commodities in markets. Caucasian rugs, like Afghan war rugs, are windows into Central Asia during their respective periods. More specifically, the violence and distintegration of community networks female weavers faced can be detected through the imagery of Afghan war rugs.

Afghan women belonging to nomadic tribes have woven rugs by hand for thousands of years. Insofar as Afghan war rugs from the late twentieth century are concerned, scholars conclude that their composition is based on axial symmetry, making certain shapes, like straight lines, more easily generated than others in traditional Afghan rug design.[17] Some weavers employ Persian-influenced figurative representation and narrative content, and they can adapt existing motifs to new purposes by making certain changes in their process. For instance, a floral pattern can be repurposed as a depiction of an explosion, in the context of the Soviet-Afghan War. This Persian influence may date back to the style of the Pazyryk Carpet. The majority of

[15] Bier, "Knots and Bolts," 107.
[16] Bier, "Knots and Bolts," 107.
[17] Charland, "War Rugs," 28.

war rugs, and knotted pile rugs in general, are visually and numerically symmetrical like the Pazyyrk Carpet.[18] This symmetry is dependent upon the number of threads in the loom's warp, which can be transformed into a numerical code. Repeating phases of a given numerical sequence creates a specific pattern. Successful representations of patterns necessitate the replication of accurate numerical codes. This synopsis of the carpet weaving technique applies to the overall process used by Afghan women making war rugs.

The Pazyryk Carpet as an Archetype

The weaving process employed by Afghan women in the modern-day can be traced back to the era of the Pazyyrk Carpet. This textile served as a methodological blueprint for weavers throughout the history of Central Asia. Modern scholarship suggests that the techniques employed in the making of this rug were more advanced than the third or fourth century B.C.E. warranted. Its weaving technique, as well as its design and overall construction, are highly advanced. This carpet is evidently "a product of an accomplished and sophisticated weaving center," which is demonstrated by its fine weaving technique.[19] The majority of textiles from this period reflect a more primitive construction; however, the images included in the Pazyryk Carpet reveal its distinct level of complexity since these depictions are woven in intricate detail. The band of elk surrounding the perimeter of the carpet, for instance, depicts the internal vertebrae and organs of these animals. To ensure that these organs were anatomically correct, a weaver would need to have significant control over warp and weft threads. Moreover, the center of the Pazyryk Carpet consists of squares containing crenelated towers. Some experts contend that this rug was cut up and stitched back together so that this tower pattern would appear in different

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[18] Tuck, "Singing the Rug," 542.

[19] Judith Lerner, "Some So-Called Achaemenid Objects from Pazyryk," *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 10, no. 4 (1991): 9.

directions.[20] Given the fact that the Pazyryk Carpet is hand-woven, the manufacturing process would have been time-consuming and labor-intensive. Such a sophisticated approach allows weavers to craft images with great detail—an ability that would be emulated in future Central Asian textiles.

In addition to its intricate detail, the Pazyryk Carpet is woven using the Turkish knot, which has a double, symmetrical shape. The enhanced structure provided by the Turkish knot likely contributed to this carpet's durability, as it was able to withstand the weather for millennia. The symmetrical double knot results in a dense pile carpet. Investigators into the Pazyryk Carpet's fibers have hypothesized that it was made using handspun wool and natural dyes.[21] While the carpet's bright colors have faded over time, its structure remains relatively intact.

An in-depth analysis of the Payzyrk carpet reveals that it was likely constructed in an urban setting rather than a nomadic one. Cooperation is common among weavers in urban society, but not among nomads; the nomadic way of life does not lend itself to specialization in craft due to increased isolation and movement. This information suggests that improvisation can be ruled out of the discussion of the Pazyryk Carpet due to the complexity of its design. By extension, a nomadic origin for the Pazyryk Carpet is unlikely. Another aspect of the Pazyryk Carpet that suggests an urban origin is its horsemen pattern since "the complexity of form of the horsemen in the carpet and the degree of variability of their design make it highly unlikely that they were worked from memory."[22] The most likely explanation is that the horsemen pattern was copied instead of committed to memory, which would require a collaborative setting.

[20] Lerner, "Some So-Called Achaemenid Objects," 10-11.

[21] Harald Böhmer and Jon Thompson, "The Pazyryk Carpet: A Technical Discussion," *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 10, no. 4 (1991): 32-33.

[22] Böhmer and Thompson, "The Pazyryk Carpet: A Technical Discussion," 31.

The Pazyryk Carpet is the first of its kind as it set the standard for similar endeavors throughout the history of Central Asia. This rug illuminates the rich tradition of textile-making as an access point into this region's artistic past. The medium and construction of woven textiles, including the materials and dyes used throughout the manufacturing process, can be traced back to this ancient artifact. The visual symbols depicted in the Pazyryk Carpet and subsequent rugs offer a glimpse into their creators' everyday lives.

Connecting the Pazyryk Carpet & Afghan War Rugs

Marking the earliest-known beginning of the carpet weaving tradition in Central Asia, the Pazyryk Carpet serves as a blueprint for contemporary weavers, including Afghan women in the latter part of the twentieth century. As artifacts of material culture, the Pazyryk Carpet and war rugs alike carry the stories of their creators and other important historical information of their respective time periods.[23] That is, the Pazyryk Carpet is a physical representation of the greatness of the ancient empire to which it belonged while war rugs are a medium for Afghan women to cope with their trauma and share their experiences of conflict. The Pazyryk Carpet and Afghan war rugs are just two examples of artifacts that demonstrate the value of material culture in historical research. As such, these textiles demonstrate that material culture is a lens through which we can view women's roles. To be sure, tracing the history of carpet weaving in Central Asia reveals the dominant role women played, and continue to play, throughout the production process. The women-centered textile making in this region has contributed to the mechanisms employed during the weaving process, such as rhythmic chants for memorizing knot sequences.

The transition from the Pazyryk Carpet to the creation of war rugs spans several millennia. Even though war rugs were the first of their kind, there was foreshadowing of these

[23] Nick Fuller, "Afghan War Rugs a Testimony to Creativity and Resilience," *Canberra Weekly* (blog), July 10, 2021: 4.

types of textiles before they became popularized in the 1980s and 1990s. It is known that modern weapons were depicted in "Afghan rugs produced in the Baluchistan region beginning in the 1930s."[24] Not only were weavers documenting their surroundings, but they were also engaging in a process of natural modernization. As statecraft, diplomacy, and warfare became mechanized, so too, did textile production. Both the Pazyryk Carpet and Afghan war rugs reflect these transitions of modernization.

The gendered nature of textile labor, coupled with global modernization, contributed to the significant role Afghan women played during the Soviet-Afghan War. Awareness of the circumstances of Afghan women before the Soviet invasion in 1979 allows historians to understand what prompted them to create war rugs at this moment in time. The rights Afghan women gained under the Soviet-backed government in Kabul headed by Mohammad Daoud Khan, including equal treatment under the law and the right to education, disappeared once the mujahideen, or Muslim fighters who resisted the Soviet occupation, took control of the country. These freedom fighters reinforced traditional gender values as an expression of their authority and based on their interpretation of the Quran.[25] War rugs were one of the few opportunities for Afghan women to exert their independence and express their creativity once the Soviet-Afghan War ensued, where they attempted to convert their experiences of conflict and disintegration into agency.

The Status of Afghan Women Before the Soviet Invasion

Before the Soviet-Afghan War erupted in 1979, there were several positive signs that the rights and liberties of Afghan women were improving. Just two years prior to the Soviet invasion

[24] Charland, "War Rugs," 28.

[25] Sima Samar, "Feminism, Peace, and Afghanistan," *Journal of International Affairs* 72, no. 2 (2019): 149.

of Afghanistan, the 1977 Constitution guaranteed all Afghan men and women equal rights before the law.[26] The upward trend in rights for Afghan women began several decades earlier. An increasing awareness of the plight of Afghan women prompted King Amanullah to modernize the nation and emancipate Afghan women between 1919 and 1929. His initiative included a greater emphasis on the education of women and a declaration that "religion does not require women to cover their faces or wear any special type of veil."[27] Female members of the royal family were seen in public without face coverings, prompting the general population of Afghan women to remove their veils voluntarily. Removing the veils was an improvement for Afghan women, as they became more visible in society and had greater freedom over their clothing. The prioritization of the rights of Afghan women continued in subsequent administrations, most famously when Mohammad Daoud Khan became Prime Minister in 1953. Daoud "encourage[d] women to play an active part in government and the workforce" and enacted policies "to allow greater roles for women in education and the workforce, to remove the veil voluntarily, and to be able to consider a future for themselves beyond the walls of their homes."[28] Moreover, women officially gained the right to vote in 1964, according to a new Constitution that called for the "right to dignity, education, and the freedom to work" for all Afghans.[29] The war waged by the Soviets against the Afghans halted the improvement of the conditions of Afghan women that began with King Amanullah and Prime Minister Daoud.

The communist regime in Kabul initially protected these new liberties for Afghan women immediately after the Soviets invaded Afghanistan; however, these advances were quickly overturned once conservative mujahideen fighters took over the rest of the country to combat the

[26] Ellis, Deborah. *Women of the Afghan War*. Praeger Publishers, 2000: xvii.
[27] Ellis, *Women of the Afghan War*, xvi.
[28] Ellis, *Women of the Afghan War*, xvii.
[29] Ellis, *Women of the Afghan War*, xvii.

infiltrators. Consequently, Afghan women found themselves forced out of the workplace, relegated to their homes, and expected to cover their faces with veils. Once confined to their households, these women faced limited prospects for earning a living autonomously and asserting their independence. Carpet weaving was one of the few viable options left for Afghan women to earn an income. Crucially, women used this medium to express their pain and overcome the hardships of the war.

War rugs were symbols of a much larger initiative on the part of Afghan women throughout the early-to-mid twentieth century to be more socially and politically involved. One of the most significant accomplishments of Afghan women in the early twentieth century was the opening of the first school for girls in 1921. Education and employment opportunities for Afghan women expanded, as Afghanistan followed patterns of women's liberation across the globe. Women were now qualified to serve in government positions, and the first two Afghan women senators were appointed in 1965. Later on, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), an independent social and political organization, was founded in Kabul in 1977. RAWA focused primarily on advocating for women's rights and spreading democratic values until it became intimately involved in the war of resistance against the Soviets in 1979. This organization was a proponent of democratic and secular values that challenged the conservative Islamic traditions emphasized by the mujahideen. In addition to RAWA's efforts, some Afghan women took a direct stand against Soviet infiltrators since "during the first jihad, they were active and powerful agents of war, supporting their men in the holy fight against the infidels."[30] At this point, most Afghan refugee women were either wives or widows of mujahideen fighters. This personal connection to the Soviet-Afghan War gave women the

[30] Khan, Afghan Refugee Women's Experience of Conflict and Disintegration," 96.

necessary motivation and justification to engage in resistance practices similar to those of RAWA. As a result, this conflict represents a crucial juncture at which Afghan women channeled previous liberation initiatives, such as those aimed at opening education and the workforce to women, to protect their country. Efforts on the part of Afghan women to advocate for their well-being and call attention to injustices extend back several decades to earlier Afghan women's movements.

Conclusion

Carpet weaving has been central to Afghan women's work and, as we will see in the next chapter, it is much more than an economic means. Indeed, woven carpets became a medium through which these women could share their experiences of conflict and cope with their trauma. Afghanistan has experienced constant conflict throughout the last century; as a historically war-torn country, it is interesting to consider the unique conditions of the Soviet-Afghan War. This conflict prompted Afghan women to incorporate symbols of violence into their textiles unlike ever before. There appears to be something specific about this moment that inspired women weavers to produce carpets that reflected their immediate surroundings. A woman-dominated art form such as carpet-making lends itself to the cataloging of a particular historical perspective. Using the Pazyryk Carpet as an entryway into a wider discussion of carpet weaving in Central Asia allows us to track consistencies and changes in this discipline over time. The depictions of weapons and violence in woven carpets are a significant development in the trajectory of textile making, and they must be investigated to draw attention to the experiences of Afghan women. Although the voices of Afghan women are rarely heard, the war rugs they crafted truly speak for themselves.

CHAPTER 2. STORYTELLING THROUGH WAR RUGS

The Soviet-Afghan War, spanning the years 1979 to 1989, permanently altered the landscape of Afghanistan and the lives of its people. The Soviets' eventual demise confirmed Alexander the Great's dictum that "one can occupy Afghanistan, but one cannot vanquish her."[31] Despite the ability of the mujahideen to resist Soviet forces, the vast majority of the Afghan population suffered immense physical and psychological trauma. This conflict had a devastating impact on Afghans, especially women and children; war rugs, then, were a material way in which women responded to these events. The most significant consequence of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan is that it created a political culture in which terrorism and extremism flourished, contributing to the rise of the Taliban, a Sunni Islamist national group, to power. This organization originated among devoted religious students of Islam who received an education in ultraconservative madrasas in refugee camps during the Soviet occupation. The Taliban's ultraconservative interpretation of the Quran and the Sharia law informs its negative attitudes toward and oppressive treatment of women. Their interpretation is such that a husband's support is contingent upon his wife's obedience, warranting punishment if his wife defies his orders or acts out of accordance with the Sharia law. The Muslim practice of *purdah*, or the seclusion of women from the public, was also reinstated by the Taliban. *Purdah* requires that women isolate in their homes and conceal their bodies when in public.[32] This distinct understanding is essential

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[31] Gregory Fremont-Barnes, *The Soviet-Afghan War 1979-89: Essential Histories* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Osprey Publishing, 2012): 11-12.

[32] Vanessa Thill, "'War Rugs' by Afghanistan's Women Weavers Bring Modern Conflict to an Ancient Tradition," Artsy, March 12, 2019.

to understanding how Afghan women continued to be marginalized after the withdrawal of Soviet troops. Russia's contest for control of Afghanistan in the twentieth century ultimately proved unsuccessful. Yet the effects of the Soviet-Afghan War continue to be felt by Afghan women today, particularly, the oppression, poverty, and sexual violence they face.

A Note on Methodology

It is often difficult for scholars to conclude precisely where, when, and by whom Central Asian carpets were made; however, iconography, dyes, and weaving patterns offer glimpses of understanding. Women weavers rarely signed or dated their creations and these rugs, in general, do not survive the elements well unless pristinely preserved. This inability to trace the exact origins of Central Asian carpets can be problematic for historical and material culture analyses. It is virtually impossible to be precise in deducing the demographics of woven rugs, but it is possible to make an educated guess based on the contents of a given carpet. Similarly, Afghan women weavers chose to remain anonymous, but we can use oral histories to draw conclusions about the kinds of experiences they depicted in their war rugs. Oral histories are crucial in filling in the blanks left by unidentified Afghan women refugees constructing war rugs in Pakistani and Iranian camps.

Afghan Women During the Soviet-Afghan War

Within six months of the Soviet invasion and the onset of the Soviet-Afghan War, approximately 800,000 Afghans fled to Pakistan.[33] The majority of these refugees were women and children who had been displaced in their homeland and became impoverished as a result. Indeed, by the end of the war, more than six million Afghans were both internally and externally displaced.[34] The horrendous human suffering that characterized this conflict did not end once

[33] Fremont-Barnes, *The Soviet-Afghan War 1979-89: Essential Histories*, 12.
[34] Samar, "Feminism, Peace, and Afghanistan," 151.

Afghan refugees arrived in Pakistan, however. Afghan women and children continued to endure poverty and relentless oppression at the hands of mujahideen leaders in control of the Pakistani refugee camps. Women in refugee camps had limited access to financial and material resources provided by the United Nations and other relief agencies, which were being sent directly to the mujahideen organizations that controlled the camps. Indeed, "the humanitarian aid that was being sent was tailored towards funding and training the mujahideen to fight in what would become a proxy war between the U.S. and USSR."[35] Western nations like the United States intended for these resources to be used by the mujahideen in their effort to resist the Soviets. The refugee population, comprised primarily of women and children, was therefore not their foremost concern. Moreover, certain refugee camps, typically those located near the Afghan border, were favored by the media and, as a result, received more supplies than other camps. Desperate for humanitarian aid, Afghan women became pawns in the game of international control taking place between Western democracy and Soviet communism throughout the latter part of the twentieth century.

Despite the involvement of superpowers like the U.S., the suffering of Afghan women was largely overlooked. Democratic nations were more preoccupied with reducing the communist threat in the Middle East than attending to the dire needs of Afghan women and children, as "the extent of female oppression in Afghanistan, for the most part, fell on deaf Western ears, with little attention in Europe and North America."[36] There was a severe lack of basic resources and security in Pakistani camps, causing Afghan refugees to struggle constantly. At one point, Pakistan officially sealed its borders to Afghan refugees due to refugee fatigue and internal issues. The Pakistani government claimed that it no longer had an obligation to support

[35] Samar, "Feminism, Peace, and Afghanistan," 148.
[36] Samar, "Feminism, Peace, and Afghanistan," 151.

Afghan refugees and wanted them to be repatriated.[37] Afghan refugees only suffered more and more as the war progressed. Afghan women, in particular, endured constant exposure to and risk of violence whether they remained in Afghanistan or sought refuge in Pakistan. The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women collected oral histories from Afghan women who had endured hardships between 1978 and 2008, which were consolidated into the United Nations (UN) Women Report. Oral history projects conducted by international organizations, such as this one, offer invaluable insight into the unfortunate realities Afghan women, who are often silenced or forgotten altogether, face. Afghan women and girls were subjected to torture and sexual abuse both in refugee camps and in their villages in Afghanistan during the war. One woman from Kandahar reported that she was raped by mujahideen fighters who forcefully entered her home, demanding payment from her father:

> Finally they took my clothes off and raped me. At first there was one person to rape me and then two others raped me. I became unconscious and don't know what happened afterwards. When I regained consciousness I opened my eyes and felt my body was tired and bruised.[38]

Violence, including abduction and rape, was rife when Afghanistan was under the control of the mujahideen during the Soviet period. Afghan women were treated as the spoils of war; rape was a widely-used weapon intended to break women down and force them into submission. Mujahideen fighters abducted women and girls from their homes and used them for sexual favors, taking ownership of their bodies. These men, who claimed to defend Afghanistan against the Soviet invaders, inflicted violence and torture upon their womenfolk. Soviet soldiers, like the mujahideen, sexually assaulted Afghan women, using rape as a weapon of war. Afghan women

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[37] Khan, "Afghan Refugee Women's Experience of Conflict and Disintegration," 93.

[38] UN Women, "'Like a Bird With Broken Wings': Afghan Women Oral History, 1978-2008" (Kabul, Afghanistan: Afghanistan Country Office, December 23, 2013), 30.

became more vulnerable during the Soviet-Afghan War than ever before, in part, due to the large number of Afghan men fighting against the Soviets.

The mujahideen resistance effort in Afghanistan took Afghan men away from their families, forcing their wives and mothers to take on both sets of gendered household tasks in their absence. Afghanistan has a highly traditional and patriarchal social structure, making the division of labor between men and women more apparent. “Rural life depends heavily upon well-defined, gender-specific roles,” with men responsible for public activities such as buying and selling goods and women responsible for tending to children and livestock and pursuing crafts like rugmaking.[39] This added responsibility was taxing for Afghan women, who, until this point, held a subservient role within their families. Countless Afghan women now found themselves acting as de facto heads of household while their husbands, sons, and brothers fought against the Soviet invaders. Reliant on the physical and financial support of their male family members, “women and children suffered particularly badly, since while their menfolk were away serving in government units or as resistance fighters, they were left to manage for themselves.”[40] The absence of men in Afghan households was a formidable burden placed on Afghan women because it was increasingly difficult for them to survive during the war: “women suffered from the loss of the wages their husbands normally brought home to feed families in a society where the long-term absence or death of a father and or his sons could produce serious disruption to family life, financially as well as socially.”[41]

The conclusion of the Soviet-Afghan War further exacerbated the plight of Afghan women, who were excluded from decision-making processes and peace talks. This exclusion

[39] Fremont-Barnes, *The Soviet-Afghan War 1979-89: Essential Histories*, 72-73.
[40] Fremont-Barnes, 89.
[41] Fremont-Barnes, 90.

contributed to their continued marginalization up until the present day. Afghan women and their rights have been transformed into political weapons utilized by men to maintain their positions of power. This politicization prevents them from accessing leadership roles and participating in decision-making processes.[42] Men disempower women through their exclusive control of the government, and in turn, command the narrative of Afghan society and politics that suits them. The ongoing dismissal of women from social and political processes in Afghanistan during the war compounded widespread poverty and perpetuated the conflict itself. The human rights situation for Afghan women has become dire, but their cries for help continue to be ignored by their male counterparts. Ongoing trauma and frustration from the war prompted Afghan women to craft war rugs reflecting their immediate surroundings. These women channeled their negative experiences of conflict and disintegration into creativity unlike ever before.

A Soviet Era War Rug

Countless Afghan women weavers worked through their trauma and shared their wartime experiences using the war rug-making process. Figure 2.1 is an example of this effort to utilize a therapeutic outlet like carpet weaving to cope with the immense violence, devastation, and loss associated with war. While there is no exact date provided for Figure 2.1, it can be inferred that this carpet was woven during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan since it includes images of Soviet helicopters and soldiers. Scholars believe this textile is a Baluch carpet, likely constructed by Baluchi people living in Afghanistan or eastern Iran during this period. The focal image of this textile is the Friday Mosque of Herat, which is pictured in its upper portion. The name of the mosque is written above it in Persian script and below it is a line that reads, "Republic of Afghanistan." The soldiers at the bottom of Figure 2.1 provide one of the more interesting

[42] Samar, 145-146.

aspects of this carpet to consider since they reveal how Afghan women perceived the Soviets. More specifically, they viewed the Soviets with fear, anger, and contempt. Afghan women most often encountered Soviet soldiers under violent circumstances, including those of pillage, rape, and murder. As such, the Soviets represented the complete decimation of the world these women once knew; their families were indelibly marked by the cruelty caused by the Soviet invasion. Many Afghan women recounted their interactions with and perceptions of Soviet soldiers through their oral histories in the UN Women Report. One Afghan woman from Herat described the trauma she suffered from witnessing her brother's murder at the hands of the Soviets:

> My eldest brother was a Mullah. He was respected by all the villagers and had a reputation as a very kind man. During the Soviet blockade, we concealed him in a shelf in my room. Soviet soldiers entered the house to search it and when they found him in the shelf they quickly shot him with artillery fire so that his brain was scattered on the floor. My brother's head was split open. My brother was killed before my eyes. I was paralyzed for two years after the murder of my brother.[43]

Figure 2.1, while it may not depict this woman's exact experience, reflects the life-ruining interactions Afghan women had with Soviet soldiers. The soldiers woven into this carpet have an ominous presence, stiffly standing guard while facing away from the audience, rendering them anonymous. The trauma that this woman from Herat endured was a direct result of the brutality of the Soviets, and war rugs like Figure 2.1 reveal how fearful Afghan women were of these invaders. War rug-making affords Afghan women anonymity in that they can use this art form to make political statements without fear of retaliation. Another woman from Herat, who was a widow, described the capture and murder of her son:

> One night, many unknown people attacked my home and arrested my son on accusation of affiliation with the mujahedin. They accused him because his father was a mujahed, therefore he must be a mujahed too. They took my eldest son… When many days had

[43] UN Women, "'Like a Bird With Broken Wings': Afghan Women Oral History, 1978-2008," 50.

> passed, they didn't say anything regarding my son. Finally, after twelve days, I recovered his dead body from the land.[44]

It is likely that these "unknown people" were Soviet soldiers, or at the very least, Soviet sympathizers. This woman and countless others lost their husbands, sons, and brothers in forceful manners similar to this testimony. Figure 2.1, by showcasing Soviet soldiers, symbolizes Afghan women's effort to understand and communicate the relentless brutality of their enemies. War rugs were a vital coping mechanism for Afghan women as they attempted to make sense of the complete and utter devastation resulting from the Soviet-Afghan War.

Post-War Reintegration

In March 2002, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) began a voluntary repatriation program aiming to return around 700,000 refugees to Afghanistan. This plan ultimately resulted in the return of 400,000 refugees from Pakistan and Iran each. Even with global attention directed toward Afghanistan, the UNHCR rolled out basic shelter, food, and health services very slowly, proving that doing so was a massive undertaking.[45] There was a severe lack of financial resources for reintegration projects, basic services, and economic opportunities, which deterred Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran from returning home to Afghanistan. Although the UNHCR's repatriation initiative was voluntary, many Afghans were mandated to return to their home country due to the overwhelming volume of refugees in foreign camps. When forced to do so, women refugees found themselves at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder in Afghanistan with no one to rely on for support but themselves and their surviving children.[46] Nearly 90,000 mujahideen fighters died during the Soviet-Afghan War,

[44] UN Women, "'Like a Bird With Broken Wings': Afghan Women Oral History, 1978-2008," 57.

[45] Khan, "Afghan Refugee Women's Experience of Conflict and Disintegration," 95.

[46] Khan, "Afghan Refugee Women's Experience of Conflict and Disintegration," 103.

leaving countless wives without their husbands and daughters without their fathers.[47] Afghan women were reluctant to remarry once widowed because they feared that no man would take on the financial and emotional burden of their children. Poverty and displacement caused so much stress that Afghans were unable to support each other's survival efforts although they often wished they could. The constant pain and suffering of the Soviet-Afghan War caused Afghan community support networks to disintegrate. A woman from Bamyan explained that after her husband was killed in an air attack, she was forced to leave her infant son behind due to the torture and ridicule of her deceased husband's family:

> At the time of my husband's death I was five months pregnant. After four months I gave birth to a baby son. My husband had a stepmother and a brother and they tortured me a lot. I was obliged to suffer all their beatings and torture because of my son, as he was small. For three years I was with them. Many times they kicked me out of their home. Finally after three years I went to my father's house. They didn't give me my son. They kept him with themselves even though they didn't even give [him] a pair of clothes to wear.[48]

Losses of family members and financial resources forced Afghans to look out for themselves, even if that meant abandoning surviving family members. This desperation made Afghans reluctant and often incapable of aiding those around them. Afghan women became isolated as a result, especially as they became widows and single mothers. Afghan culture, with its emphasis on patriarchy and conservative values, allowed for the harsh mistreatment of widows during and after the Soviet-Afghan War. Widows became a collective burden on their communities, and they were oppressed rather than venerated like their brave mujahideen husbands. These women were expected to endure whatever punishment they received now that they lacked the protection of their husbands. Moreover, young girls were particularly vulnerable since many became

[47] Alan Taylor, "The Soviet War in Afghanistan, 1979 - 1989 - The Atlantic," 1.

[48] UN Women, "'Like a Bird With Broken Wings': Afghan Women Oral History, 1978-2008," 56.

orphans after suffering through the deaths of both parents. Many orphan girls were forced to live with their extended families for survival and were sold into marriage by these estranged relatives. Orphans were viewed as economic burdens for extended relatives, who oftentimes were unable to feed their own children. One woman recalled being sold into marriage after she was orphaned at age eight:

> My sister and her husband were not able to accommodate us. So they sold me to one of his friends... He sold us for the price of three thousand Afghanis…After one year [the friend] by cooperation of his family married me. Now it is twenty-three years since my marriage and I have four sons and one daughter.[49]

Afghan men who survived the war preyed on vulnerable young girls, aware that these lonely orphans would have no choice except to comply with their demands for survival. Poverty and isolation often compelled Afghan women and girls into unfavorable and traumatizing arrangements such as forced marriages. They overcame impossibly difficult circumstances both during and after this conflict and their ability to survive is as inspiring as it is astonishing.

Contemporaneous Carpets

War rugs carry the trauma and isolation of Afghan women in their designs, demonstrating how widespread the devastation of the Soviet occupation was. It is important to note the continuity of design elements across various woven carpets, especially those produced within the same period. For instance, Figure 2.2 subtly incorporates war images into its seemingly traditional design. The tanks depicted along the top and the bottom of this carpet are not immediately noticeable at first glance. The weaver responsible for this carpet was clever in her creation, as it otherwise resembles a traditional Central Asian textile. The striking similarities between Figure 2.2 and Figure 2.3 are interesting to observe given that the former is a war rug

[49] UN Women, "'Like a Bird With Broken Wings': Afghan Women Oral History, 1978-2008," 52.

and the latter is not. Indeed, Figure 2.3 is not a war rug, but it was likely made around the same time as Figure 2.2. It is reasonable to conclude that these textiles are contemporaneous since they share colors and design elements. Both rugs feature blue and purple dyes as well as a large hexagonal centerpiece with floral accents. Figure 2.2 and Figure 2.3 also share similar border patterns. Even though the identities of the weavers who made these two carpets are unknown, it is clear that they used similar weaving processes and materials in their respective works, establishing the likelihood that they were produced around the same time.

In comparison to traditional carpets, most war rugs produced during the Soviet period were smaller in size since they were often used as prayer rugs. War rugs, when functioning as prayer rugs, were designed to allow their creators to speak to Allah and ask him to give them the strength to endure these difficult times. War rugs served a very distinct function when compared to traditional Central Asian carpets, as they were more closely aligned with personal experiences and emotions. Figure 2.2 and Figure 2.3, while very similar in their design, demonstrate how contemporaneous carpets can have different meanings and uses.

The fact that these textiles are likely contemporaneous demonstrates that traditional carpets continued to be made at the same time as war rugs during and after the Soviet-Afghan War. While women were determined to cope with the trauma of this conflict through carpet weaving, not all carpets from the Soviet period were war rugs. It is possible that not all woman weavers used carpetmaking as a therapeutic outlet as many of their peers did, and therefore continued to craft traditional Afghan rugs. It is also important to note that carpet weaving was a means for Afghan women to survive economically, many of whom were poverty-stricken refugees in Pakistani and Iranian camps. It may be that women continued to craft traditional carpets during the Soviet period for the sake of earning an income, and in turn, feeding their

families. The cost of the necessary raw materials may have also limited weavers in their ability to produce larger carpets.

Afghan women were able to continue carpet weaving while residing in foreign refugee camps during the war because of the resources and facilities provided by international relief organizations. This support continues in the present day. The UNHCR is one such organization that recently supported the construction of a carpet-weaving center for Afghan women in Qaleen Bafan, a community of landless refugees and displaced persons in northern Afghanistan. This center provides jobs for unemployed women weavers and helps them negotiate higher prices when selling their products. Typically, carpet weaving takes place inside the homes of Afghan women, who rely on middlemen to order the carpets and then secure the materials and the looms necessary to construct them. These carpets would then be sent to Pakistan for further cutting, washing, and drying.[50] This UNHCR initiative will allow Afghan women weavers to exert more control over their craft and to make an income to support their families. This UNHCR weaving center will counteract the profits middlemen reap from exploiting woman weavers. Afghan women have only become more impoverished and desperate as they face the oppression of the Taliban, including its mandate forbidding them to work outside of their homes.

Iranian War Rugs

Traditionally, Afghan rugs have referred to carpets woven exclusively in Afghanistan; however, as countless Afghan women weavers became displaced throughout the Soviet occupation, these textiles took on a new definition. War rugs, then, can still be considered Afghan carpets even if produced by Afghan refugees in Iran or Pakistan. It is estimated that 200,000 Afghan refugees fled to Iran by the end of 1979 and this number only increased as the

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[50] "Afghanistan's Women Carpet Weavers Thrown an Economic Lifeline," UNHCR US, 1.

Soviet-Afghan War continued. In 1997, nearly ten years after the conclusion of this conflict, 2.7 million Afghan refugees remained in Iran.[51] Figure 2.4 is an example of a war rug likely crafted by an Afghan woman weaver seeking refuge in Iran. It is clear that this carpet is a war rug since there are missiles and fighter jets pictured alongside more traditional woven elements such as animals and floral patterns. Moreover, several clues point toward the fact that this carpet was made in Iran. First, this textile contains dragons and lions in its design, which as we will see in the next section, are both animals common in Iranian storytelling. Lions, especially, would be found in Iranian iconography given the country's animal life.

Despite its imagery, the most revealing aspect of Figure 2.4 that suggests an Iranian origin is its pigmentation. Indeed, based on the bright pink dyes used in this rug, it was likely made in Iran. Dried madder root from Iran has been used as a natural dye for thousands of years, as it produces an intense and vivid pigment. Madder root is a plant from a low-growing, vine-like herb with a permanent red dye. This plant can be dried, ground up, and soaked in water to convert it into a red or pink dye. Once cooled, fiber or yarn can be mixed with the soaked madder root to absorb its color. Madder root is specific to Iran because this nation borders Azerbaijan, where it was first discovered in the Greater Caucasian Mountains. Afghanistan and Pakistan border Iran on the opposite side as Azerbaijan, indicating that weavers in Afghanistan and Pakistan would have much less access to dried madder root than those in Iran. This raw material allowed for the creation and use of pink dyes almost exclusively in Iran throughout the history of Central Asia, meaning that carpets made in other regions rarely possess this same red or pink pigment. Overall, Figure 2.4 demonstrates that war rugs were not exclusive to

[51] "Refugees Magazine Issue 108 (Afghanistan : The Unending Crisis) - The Biggest Caseload in the World," UNHCR US, June 1, 1997, 1.

Afghanistan and instead were made throughout Central Asia as a result of the displacement of Afghan women refugees.

Rostam's Seven Trials

Figure 2.5 is another example of a rug most likely woven outside of Afghanistan, further demonstrating that women weavers drew inspiration from their surrounding environments. This carpet is an interpretation of the mythological story of Rostam's seven trials, which was one of several tales included in the *Shahnameh* written by the Persian poet, Hakīm Abul-Qāsim Firdawsī Tūsī, who was also called Ferdowsi. The Samanid dynasty commissioned Ferdowsi, a nationalistic poet who championed traditional heroic verse, in 977 B.C.E. to undertake the responsibility of writing a national epic for pre-Islamic Iran, resulting in the *Shahnameh*. Scholars contend that the *Shahnameh* aided the continuity of the Persian language, as it was written during a period in which modern Persian emerged and flourished.[52] The *Shahnameh* follows a literary logic, which unifies its various episodes. Ferdowsi utilized symbolic expression in his rendition of the history of pre-Islamic Iran, which caused many of his stories to resemble myths. Although the *Shahnameh* is ultimately a work of literature, it still references contextual information about pre-Islamic Iran.

The story of Rostam the Hero explores the relationship between a father and his son and the succession of one generation to the next. Indeed, the story of the seven trials "is a pivotal point in Rostam's life. It takes place when he is a teenager, who although possessed of enormous physical power, is still a mere pawn in the hands of his father."[53] Rostam's father eventually confesses that he is growing older and more feeble, and he feels confident that Rostam is ready

[52] Hakīm Abul-Qāsim Firdawsī Tūsī (Ferdowsi), "The Epic of Shahnameh - A Thousand Years of the Persian Book | Exhibitions (Library of Congress)," web page, March 27, 2014, 1.
[53] Mahmoud Omidsalar, "Rostam's Seven Trials and the Logic of Epic Narrative in the Shāhnāma," *Asian Folklore Studies* 60, no. 2 (2001): 264.

to replace him as king. It is at this point that he sends Rostam to overcome the seven trials to test his strength. The tale of Rostam's seven trials demonstrates that physical prowess was an ideal trait of a formidable leader. For instance, during his third trial, Rostam slays a magical dragon, which is one of the animals depicted in Figure 2.5. This emphasis on physical strength is present throughout the various episodes of the *Shahnameh*. As the *Shahnameh* demonstrates, heroic acts were a focal point of ancient Central Asian tales. Ferdowsi's portrayal of Rostam informed Central Asian attitudes toward war and violence over time. The importance of depicting such deeds in both the *Shahnameh* and Figure 2.5 relates to the formation of the war-torn identity of this region.

Rostam's trials were viewed as a rite of passage, reflecting the general attitude of Central Asian peoples toward hardship during Ferdowsi's time: "going through these trials signals Rostam's coming of age. These trials transform the boy Rostam into a man who replaces his aged father as the chief hero of the court. They are Rostam's rite of passage."[54] Rostam needed to prove to his father that he was physically capable of ascending and maintaining the throne. He daringly declared that he welcomed the opportunity to be thrown into the mountains with tigers and lions, animals also depicted in Figure 2.5.[55] Rostam successfully defeated these beasts and thus secured his kingship. Tracing Rostam's attitude toward his trials from Ferdowsi's period to the present day reveals much about the nature of conflict in this region. Enduring armed conflicts, for instance, has been viewed by Muslims as an opportunity to survive tests from Allah and demonstrate the strength of their Islamic faith. In the case of the Soviet-Afghan War, mujahideen freedom fighters understood their resistance effort as a religious jihad against Soviet

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[54] Omidsalar, "Rostam's Seven Trials and the Logic of Epic Narrative in the Shāhnāma," 262.

[55] Omidsalar, "Rostam's Seven Trials and the Logic of Epic Narrative in the Shāhnāma," 281.

heathens. As such, they felt obligated by their faith to defend their homeland and way of life against the Soviets. Similar to Ferdowsi's portrayal of Rostam's trials as a rite of passage, many mujahideen fighters considered the Soviet invasion a necessary evil that would test their strengths and solidify their religious convictions. The fact that this sentiment is portrayed in the iconography of Figure 2.5 suggests that perceptions of conflict in Central Asia have remained relatively constant over time.

In addition to the message conveyed by the images in Figure 2.5, its materials reveal much about the region in which it was made. For instance, as discussed previously, the reddish-pink dye used in this carpet's construction indicates that it was likely produced in Iran. Overall, the maker of this textile must have sought to craft a physical representation of this tale of Rostam the Hero—a foundational Iranian myth that survived many centuries. The *Shahnameh* is the seminal work of Persian literature detailing the history of Persia before the coming of Islam, which would surely be a story worthy of representation in textile form.[56] Overall, this story reveals a continuity in the attitude toward armed conflict in Central Asia and underscores the war-torn nature of this region in the modern era. Its contents are thus applicable to the experiences of Afghan women during the Soviet-Afghan War.

The Victory Arch

Figure 2.6, like Figure 2.5, depicts an important symbol in Central Asian history. This carpet portrays the Victory Arch and its entryway in the gardens of Paghman, Afghanistan, located just outside of Kabul. The Taq-e Zafar or "Arch of Victory" celebrates Afghan independence following the conclusion of the Third Anglo-Afghan War in 1919. This war was fought between Afghanistan and British India and ultimately ended in an armistice in which

[56] Tūsī (Ferdowsi), "The Epic of Shahnameh - A Thousand Years of the Persian Book | Exhibitions (Library of Congress)," 1.

Great Britain recognized Afghanistan's sovereignty. The Victory Arch was a noteworthy monument before Kabul became the site of successive conflicts with foreign nations throughout the rest of the twentieth century. The chains on the right side of Figure 2.6 are a physical representation of how this capital city became increasingly closed-off as it descended into constant turmoil.

Despite the symbolism of the Victory Arch, the rug in Figure 2.6 was likely crafted during the American period, as the airplane in the top right corner features a red cross. This red cross would be an indication of the period in which the U.S. occupied Afghanistan since the American Red Cross aided Afghan evacuees and transported basic resources via aircraft. The U.S. invaded Afghanistan following the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, carried out by al-Qaeda. This intervention was deemed a necessary defense maneuver to protect the safety of American citizens. Vowing to win the war against terrorism, President George W. Bush sent troops to defeat al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and shut down al-Qaeda camps. bin Laden, deemed responsible for the September 11 attack, was killed by American forces in Pakistan in 2011. While the Taliban claimed to have had no involvement in this terrorist attack, many experts believe that it enabled al-Qaeda to execute its plan by giving this organization a safe haven in Afghanistan. Both the Taliban and al-Qaeda emerged from mujahideen groups; however, they are separate militant associations. The Taliban surrendered in 2001 and did not reemerge as a threat to the U.S. until later in the twenty-first century.

When it was first constructed, the Victory Arch was intended to commemorate Afghanistan's victory over the British. Interestingly, this carpet depicts this monument during the American period, indicating that the symbolism of the Victory Arch is relative. In other words, Afghanistan's victory could refer to either adversary—Great Britain or the U.S. The applicability

of the Victory Arch's message is a direct reflection of the unfortunate reality that Afghanistan has been a war-torn nation throughout modern history. Constant turmoil in Afghanistan has contributed to the ceaseless oppression and plight of Afghan women. Political, social, and economic instability has prevented concrete and long-lasting change from taking root, affecting the status of Afghan women. Consecutive conflicts with foreign nations have only encouraged intolerance for women and refusals to recognize their rights as equal human beings. Afghan women developed a consciousness of the political and military events that upended their lives during the American period. This consciousness is reflected in war rugs like Figure 2.6. By depicting the Victory Arch, a monument erected during the war for independence against Great Britain, during the American occupation, this carpet reveals that at least some Afghan women equated the Americans and the British. This sentiment most likely arose out of their experiences of occupation and violence at the hands of these two powers. This pattern of foreign invasion and occupation of Afghanistan continues in the present day, impacting the survival of Afghan women.

The Continued Plight of Afghan Women

The rise of the Taliban in 1994 caused a grave humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, specifically concerning Afghan women and children. The Taliban assumed centralized control of the nation for the first time from 1996 to 2001. In 2021, the Taliban returned to power after U.S. troops withdrew from Afghanistan, marking the conclusion of a twenty-year conflict. The emergence of this group can be traced back to the period of Soviet occupation in which mujahideen training camps separated Afghan men from women. This separation reinforced a lack of tolerance and respect for women, leading to a tradition in which Afghan men viewed women as subservient, second-class citizens. "The overt politicization of Afghan women, their

rights, and their role within society" that we see today are rooted in the Soviet-Afghan War.[57] The Taliban has targeted women in all sectors of Afghan society, such as women journalists, civil servants, and entrepreneurs. Women are banned from working, pursuing secondary and tertiary education, and appearing in public without a male chaperone.

The Taliban differs from its Muslim brethren in its interpretation of the Quran and the Sharia law. This interpretation is harsh and hyper-conservative and therefore lends itself to tighter restrictions on citizens' conduct than previous administrations. In addition to this very specific interpretation of the Quran and Sharia law, anti-Westernism informs the Taliban's view of women. This organization claims to follow a pure, fundamentalist form of Islam although many of its policies against women have no basis in the Quran or the Sharia law at all. Afghan women have suffered increasingly since the Taliban returned to power in 2021, facing the loss of their basic rights to education, employment, and equal treatment under the law. They now also experience violent punishments for alleged crimes, and criminal penalties under the Sharia law include public executions, stonings, lashings, and amputations. Women often incur these punishments for crimes they did not commit and are wrongfully suspected to have committed by the Taliban.[58] Just as rape was used as a weapon of war against Afghan women during the Soviet occupation, physical torture is now used by the Taliban as a threat to keep women subservient.

The loss of rights, in addition to a lack of economic opportunity, for women has created a crisis of poverty and malnutrition. Afghan women are subject to physical punishment and torture at the hands of the Taliban. They have been "whipped or beaten by the Taliban due to [their] shoes mistakenly showing or for merely making a noise, which the Taliban deemed as

[57] Samar, "Feminism, Peace, and Afghanistan," 145

[58] "Taliban Orders Implementation of Their Interpretation of Sharia Law in Afghanistan | International Center for Transitional Justice," 1.

distractions."[59] This harassment and degradation originated in the late twentieth century and, as one Afghan woman revealed in an interview for the Wilson Center, continues in the present day with the Taliban's power in Afghanistan now reinstalled:

> I just think it's a shame to all of humanity. There's a part of the world where people are thinking about going to Mars or creating artificial intelligence and then there's a whole country in which girls aren't even allowed to go to school…How are we going to justify that?[60]

The Taliban destroyed all institutions intended to aid and protect women, including the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) and the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC). The former organization was replaced with the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. As a result of the absence of protective measures for women, reports of domestic violence and forced marriages in Afghanistan increased. Male family members abuse and surveil their female counterparts since the Taliban views the actions of women as a reflection of men. The Taliban made clear that male relatives would be responsible for the wrongdoings of the women in their families, meaning that Afghan women face oppression both inside and outside their homes:

> On bad days, I just feel everything is done and finished and I can't do anything…I lost my freedom. It was so difficult for me to accept this because I was a person who always [fought] for my life, for my freedom, to inspire other women to come out and work.[61]

These hopeless conditions, caused by the loss of rights that Afghan women experienced, have prompted them to continue their attempts to flee the country. It is becoming increasingly difficult for them to do so, however, with restrictions on their freedom of movement and the need to be accompanied by a male family member. Carpet weaving is the primary economic means and

[59] Samar, "Feminism, Peace, and Afghanistan," 151.
[60] *Hindsight Up Front: A Conversation with Afghan Women,* 2021, 11:46.
[61] *Hindsight Up Front: A Conversation with Afghan Women*, 7:29.

therapeutic outlet for Afghan women confined to their homes. This craft is one of the few accessible opportunities that provide these women with a semblance of hope and independence.

Conclusion

Despite its money-making potential, carpet weaving has been and continues to be much more than an economic means for Afghan women. Textiles are key elements of political discourse in modern times, as the violent iconography of the war rugs Afghan women created reveals much about the nature of the Soviet-Afghan conflict.[62] Moreover, war rugs carry the intimate experiences of individual Afghan women, telling their stories of tragedy, cultural losses, and outright desperation. These women used the gendered space characteristic of textile production to their advantage, providing themselves with a creative outlet for story-telling. The effect of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan on the country's carpet weaving tradition was "felt almost immediately, as female weavers began subtly—and later overtly—to incorporate complex war imagery into their designs."[63]

The political regime and religious culture of Afghanistan have prevented Afghan women from participating in virtually any role in the public sphere over time. Moreover, the period immediately following the Soviet-Afghan War foreshadowed the continued plight of Afghan women today. Encouraging the mujahideen in their jihadi quest was deemed an effective way to mobilize rural Afghan support against the communist regime during the war; however, doing so eventually led to the formation of jihadi training camps and militant groups, which became breeding grounds for extremism and anti-woman sentiments. This development was detrimental to the status of Afghan women, who continued to face oppression in the aftermath of the conflict at the hands of their male counterparts. The Soviets were not solely responsible for the trauma

[62] Suleman, *Textiles of the Middle East and Central Asia: The Fabric of Life*, 180.
[63] Suleman, *Textiles of the Middle East and Central Asia: The Fabric of Life*, 195.

incurred by Afghan women, as mujahideen fighters in refugee camps and Afghan villages also inflicted wanton violence upon them.

CONCLUSION

Understanding the Afghan women's perspective of the Soviet-Afghan War and its implications demonstrates that women experience armed conflict differently than men. As a result of their unique experience, which was characterized by the disintegration of their community support networks and lack of means for independence and economic opportunity, women turned to their craft of carpet weaving to share their stories and cope with their trauma. They utilized the woman-centered nature of textile production to their advantage, as doing so proved an effective means for storytelling. These textiles raise awareness of their creators' experiences, as Afghan women lack a political and social voice both in Afghanistan and within the international community.

The importance of war rugs lies in their ability to shed light on the experiences of an oppressed and marginalized group of people, who otherwise would not have a voice to do so themselves. Studying these textiles is therefore crucial to bring awareness to the plight of Afghan women and better understand the broader implications of the Soviet-Afghan War. Afghan women were subjected to physical and psychological trauma, as human rights abuses were committed against them by Afghan men, mujahideen freedom fighters, and Soviet soldiers. Their oral histories reveal their deeply disturbing experiences, which have rendered them helpless and isolated. These women's ability to survive this violence and continue to care for their surviving family members is astonishing. Without the determination of Afghan women, the semblance of Afghan community support networks that remain today would likely have disintegrated altogether. Afghan women were forced to take on the physical and financial burdens of heading

their households when they lost husbands, sons, and brothers to the resistance effort. This added responsibility for women, while taxing, proved essential in preserving fragile community ties in Afghanistan.

Afghan women's ability to support their families has become increasingly difficult, however, with the rise of the Taliban to power. The ultra-conservative and anti-woman sentiments upheld by the Taliban have made Afghan society a treacherous place for Afghan women. Forbidden from working, attending school, and leaving their homes without a male chaperone, Afghan women are prisoners in their own nation. Despite the grave prospects of societal change for Afghan women, there is still hope for progress in the future with the proper approach. Afghan women made their voices heard through their war rugs during and after the Soviet-Afghan War, and they continue to find new ways to engage in government and society. They are increasingly vocal on social media and news platforms and have often taken to the streets to protest their mistreatment. Afghan women, particularly young women, have taken more direct action in recent years to counteract their oppression under the Taliban. The ceaseless persecution of women by the Taliban has also garnered increased attention in the media and scholarship from the international community, especially Western nations.

By weaving war rugs, Afghan women effectively attracted international attention to the violent and traumatic circumstances they bravely endured during the Soviet-Afghan War. While a seemingly small effort, these women utilized the resources and community networks available to them as both a therapeutic outlet and a means of resistance. Their stories demonstrate the centrality of art in women's history and the value of studying marginalized populations to create

a more accurate historical picture. Afghan women's carpet weaving has indeed "demonstrated that perhaps Afghanistan's greatest hope lies in the gradual undertaking of many small tasks."[64]

[64] Lee, "The Story of Hope," 141.

APPENDIX ONE

Figure 1.1 *The Pazyryk Carpet*, courtesy of The State Hermitage Museum.

Figure 1.2 *Dragon Rug*, courtesy of The Textile Museum.

Figure 1.3 *East Caucuses Carpet*, courtesy of The Textile Museum.

APPENDIX TWO

Figure 2.1 *Soviet Era War Rug*, courtesy of Dr. Ann Norton.

Figure 2.2 *War Rug with Traditional Design Elements*, courtesy of Dr. Ann Norton.

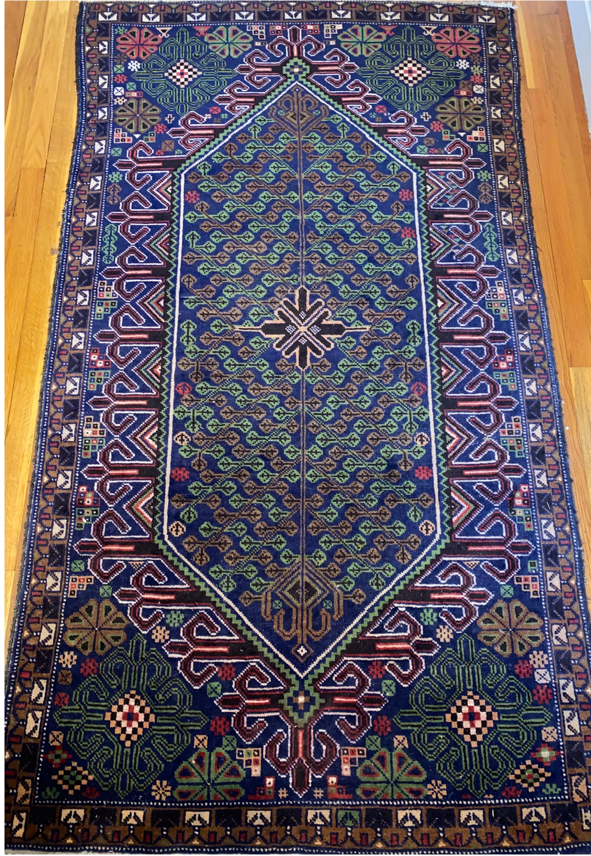

Figure 2.3 *Traditional Afghan Carpet*, courtesy of Dr. Ann Norton.

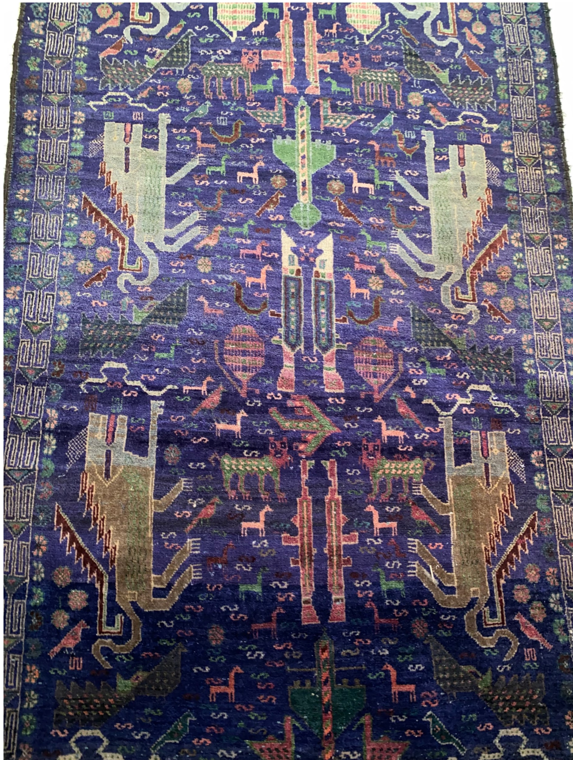

Figure 2.4 *Iranian War Rug*, courtesy of Dr. Ann Norton.

Figure 2.5 *Rug Depicting Rostam's Seven Trials*, courtesy of Dr. Ann Norton.

Figure 2.6 *Rug Depicting the Victory Arch*, courtesy of Dr. Ann Norton.

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