

2023

In The Face of War: The Future of Afghan Historical Landmarks

Katelynn Rynski

Southern Illinois University Carbondale

Follow this and additional works at: <https://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/legacy>

Recommended Citation

Rynski, Katelynn (2023) "In The Face of War: The Future of Afghan Historical Landmarks," *Legacy*. Vol. 23: Iss. 1, Article 4.

Available at: <https://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/legacy/vol23/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by OpenSIUC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Legacy by an authorized administrator of OpenSIUC. For more information, please contact opensiuc@lib.siu.edu.

Katelynn Rynski

In The Face of War: The Future of Afghan Historical Landmarks

When new leaders have dismantled and replaced the political architecture of government, they have simultaneously determined which parts of the country's culture they continued to honor and which aspects they abandoned. The Middle East and neighboring regions, particularly Afghanistan, contained a plethora of significant cultural landmarks and artifacts. However, political turmoil in the past century left these landmarks vulnerable to vandalism and destruction. From the Soviet Union's interference after the Saur Revolution and the Taliban's extremism and reemergence in 2021, these landmarks occupied tenuous spaces if they hoped to survive.

As for their significance to world history, the tenets of history were inseparable from art, as the wisdom of ancestors ran through the artifacts they left behind. No matter the region or culture, these artifacts were instrumental in understanding human identity. Thus, the plight of Afghanistan's remoteness required the utmost awareness and aid in their plight.

As the centerpiece of the Eastern world, Afghanistan faced constant threats and invasions since ancient times. Both Cyrus and Darius the Great conquered the lands of Afghanistan and added them to the Persian Empire by 522 BC. Alexander the Great's conquest of the Persian Empire in 330 B.C. caused Afghanistan to fall into enemy hands once again, exposing the territory to Greek influence. All of these aforementioned leaders implemented terms of social tolerance, allowing the conquerors and the conquered cultures to mix, rebuilding structures destroyed in the fighting in the civilization of the Afghan kingdoms – with influence from the conquering empires of Persia and Hellenistic Greece.¹ However, invasions from differing ethnic groups persisted into medieval times with Mongol rule.²

Competition between Afghan tribal groups developed the tribes' keen fighting abilities. In the early thirteenth century, faced with great resistance, invading Mongol leader Genghis Khan decided to raze cities and cultural

1 Donald Kagan, Steven Ozment, Frank M. Turner, and Alison Frank, *The Western Heritage*, Vol. 1, 11th ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Pearson, 2013), 23.

2 Cynthia Smith, "The Great Game and Afghanistan," *Library of Congress*, accessed June 29, 2023, <https://www.loc.gov/ghe/cascade/index.html?appid=a0930b1f4e424987ba68c28880f088ea>.

centers to wound the enemy physically and mentally.³ The carnage of cities weakened trade routes and bodies; the carnage of culture weakened Afghan tribal identity. Two generations later, Mongol successor Hulegu Khan (grandchild of Genghis Khan) reconquered modern-day western Afghanistan in the name of his Ilkhanid dynasty. Hulegu Khan cultivated Mongol influence in Afghan art, commissioning artwork such as statues, jewelry, and manuscripts.⁴ The resulting artwork was a testament to the survival of Afghan culture and the combination of all the invaders that shaped them. The forced cultural changes allowed Afghans to adopt multicultural practices, becoming socially acceptable to practice different religions. During the 1700s, the monarchy of Ahmad Shah Durrani finally allowed the land of Afghanistan to establish a national identity through the stability of his reign.⁵

However, Afghanistan still faced challenges in the form of foreign interference. Russia and Great Britain, because of their expanding empires, held significant interest in Afghanistan because of its status as a buffer state. Labeled “The Great Game,” a triad of Anglo-Afghan Wars throughout the nineteenth century resulted from the British desire to control Afghanistan. After World War I, Great Britain finally signed an armistice and pledged to withdraw from Afghanistan in August 1919.⁶ In Afghanistan’s fight for cultural unity, the country was utilized as a pawn, weakening monarchies and allowing for the lead-up of tyrannical governments in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This attempt at unity has led to the erasure of an identity the Afghan people had fought for millennia to claim.

It is important to note the extent of poverty Afghanistan experienced as a result of the corruption of the Soviet and Taliban governments. While in ancient and medieval times, the Islam-dominated countries of the Middle East were the centerpiece of technological and cultural advancement, its stagnation and contrasting Western domination have left the Middle East vulnerable to internal coups. The Afghan people also lacked a secular government, which restricted the freedom to possess wealth and resources because their Islamic government promoted obedience and familial solidarity. With each new political crisis, the people of Afghanistan had fewer resources to rely on; therefore, each generation experienced more profound depths of poverty. As evidenced by a 2022 inquiry orchestrated by the International Rescue Committee (IRC), ninety-seven percent of Afghans were below the

3 Jules Stewart, “Afghanistan: Graveyard of Armies,” *Military History Monthly*, accessed July 2, 2023, <https://www.military-history.org/feature/17th-century/afghanistan-graveyard-of-armies.htm>.

4 Caroline Kim, “The Treasures of Genghis Khan,” *Humanities* 23, no. 5 (Sep./Oct. 2002): 12., <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=7481880&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

5 Smith, “The Great Game and Afghanistan.”

6 Ibid.

country's poverty line. Zuhra Wardak, an IRC deputy director, expounded upon the many different factors Afghans faced in simply feeding their families, "Increasing hunger, natural disasters, unemployment, a banking and liquidity crisis, rights-violating restrictions on women and girls, and the lack of functioning economy mean Afghans are facing a multitude of simultaneous crises."⁷ The magnitude of such destruction could be remedied only through a revolution of events, a contingency the country cannot afford. What would become of its historical monuments and artifacts if its people were scattered to the winds?

Afghanistan exhibited a long and varied history of civilization and cultures—of which landmarks remain. However, the political turmoil of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries had placed these historical landmarks and artifacts in elevated risk and jeopardy for their very existence. The 1978 Saur Revolution and subsequent Soviet coup started the domino effect, exposing the Afghan people to generations of political strife and poverty, resulting in the Afghan Civil Wars and the rise and domination by the Taliban. Despite their perceived isolation, these historical landmarks had been intruded upon by both conquering regimes and their people seeking relief from their impoverishment. As such, those seeking to profit from ancient histories exploited Afghan culture and legacies. War imparted poverty on its people no matter their allegiance, and the impoverished had no choice but to be complicit in the vandalization of the artifacts of their ancient histories to continue to exist in the present. Afghanistan's cultural landmarks clasped a bleak future due to the lack of preservation and care of those in power. Afghan culture was exploited by those seeking to profit from ancient histories, leaving their legacies to dust.

Afghanistan's ancient kingdoms of Arachosia, Aria, and Bactria covered most of modern-day Afghanistan.⁸ Approximately two thousand historic ruins persist in Afghanistan, the oldest dating back to the Paleolithic Era. Since Afghanistan was the backdrop of the transmissions of great cultural and religious expansions, these archaeological sites were necessary to aid our understanding of the ancient world and how Afghanistan significantly shaped the religions and trade routes that developed into the modern world.⁹

It was of the utmost importance to stress examples of these sites to thoroughly demonstrate how invaluable each was to understanding ancient societies and customs. Even the minor details proved precious to furthering

7 International Rescue Committee, "Afghanistan: An Entire Population Pushed into Poverty," accessed, December 22, 2022, <https://www.rescue.org/article/afghanistan-entire-population-pushed-poverty>.

8 Fredrik Hiebert, "The Lost Worlds of Afghanistan," in Fredrik T. Hiebert and Pierre Cambon, eds., *Afghanistan: Hidden Treasures from the National Museum, Kabul*, (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2008), 55.

9 Hiebert, "The Lost Worlds of Afghanistan," 56.

our knowledge to preserve the artifacts and their heritage. For example, Ai-Khanoum was a Bactrian fortress. Its architecture demonstrated Hellenistic Greek influence –caused by Alexander the Great’s conquest of Bactria—and the combination of Greek and Bactrian art. The prominence of Greek architecture in the Middle East and Afghanistan showed the extent of trade routes and trading of artistic styles. Furthermore, priceless artifacts— jewelry and statues— discovered in Ai-Khanoum allowed archaeologists to analyze religions and their status symbols. Unfortunately, these artifacts fell victim to pillages and illicit dealings following the Saur Revolution and Afghan Civil Wars.¹⁰

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) designated two UNESCO World Heritage sites in Afghanistan: the Minaret of Jam and the Buddhas of Bamiyan.¹¹ Commissioned by Sultan Ghiyas-od-din as a symbol of his conquests and the glory of the Persian Ghurid dynasty, the Minaret of Jam itself was one of the most significant brick buildings to ever exist at sixty-five meters tall. Meanwhile, the Buddhas of Bamiyan were built between 200-400 A.D. as a Buddhist monastery along the Silk Road. In addition, they were instrumental in understanding the transmission of religions, as the Buddhas of Bamiyan testified to Buddhism’s travel along the Silk Road.¹² They were the largest Buddhist statues in existence until their destruction by the Taliban in 2001.¹³

UNESCO expressed interest in adding at least two more Afghan World Heritage sites to their protection: the cities of Herat and Balkh.¹⁴ The city of Herat was the center of the Abbasid Caliphate; the citadel, mosques, and mausoleums still exist today in prime condition. Likewise, Balkh was a Bactrian city; it uniquely was a religious center for Zoroastrian, Buddhism, and Islam.¹⁵

While UNESCO committed resources to preserve historical sites and artifacts from disrepair caused by age, protecting them from the perils of war and lootings was, unfortunately, a delicate matter. The initial 1972 Conference of UNESCO outlined their reach of power and responsibilities as “shall be understood to mean the establishment of a system of international cooperation

10 Osmund Bopearachchi, “Vandalised Afghanistan,” *Frontline: India’s National Magazine*, March 16, 2002, <https://frontline.thehindu.com/arts-and-culture/heritage/vandalised-afghanistan/article30244351.ece>.

11 UNESCO, “Afghanistan,” *UNESCO World Heritage Convention*, accessed October 15, 2022, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/af/>.

12 Francesco Bandarin, “Afghanistan: the Historical Sites of Key Concern after the Taliban’s Return,” *The Art Newspaper*, August 25, 2021, accessed November 2022, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/08/25/afghanistan-the-historical-sites-of-key-concern-after-the-talibans-return>.

13 Bopearachchi, “Vandalised Afghanistan.”

14 UNESCO, “Afghanistan.”

15 Bandarin, “Afghanistan: the Historical Sites.”

and assistance designed to support States Parties to the Convention in their efforts to conserve and identify that heritage..."¹⁶ As an organization of the United Nations, UNESCO was only afforded so much power to protect historical landmarks, as they disallowed to go against both the globalist policies of the United Nations or abided with the nationalist rulings of government. Lacking the nation's support, UNESCO was not authorized to conduct major rescues without committing grave offenses—Afghanistan is a prime example. For instance, in 2001, UNESCO officials could not travel to Afghanistan in an attempt to protect the Buddhas of Bamiyan because the United Nations did not recognize the Taliban as a legitimate government.¹⁷ Nevertheless, Francesco Bandarin, an ex-UNESCO director, maintained the necessity of protecting Afghan landscapes and artifacts, "In this situation, Afghan heritage is at serious risk of attacks and destruction as well as the collapse of the management structures built up in recent years to conserve and protect the country's ancient past..."¹⁸

In the Western world (particularly the United States), the word 'revolution' communicated a positive connotation for its riddance of monarchies in favor of freedom-filled democracies. However, most people rarely realize the drastic societal and cultural changes that come with the often extreme political modifications. In Afghanistan, the Saur Revolution's Soviet interference removed aspects of Afghan culture in favor of designs that promoted Soviet communist beliefs, such as the replacement of Afghan traditional homes with the Soviet's *mikroraion*, utilitarian apartment complexes.¹⁹ The Taliban left a similar influence focused on their extremist Islamic ideology, as will be explained in greater detail later on. Combining social, political, and cultural changes from the Saur Revolution and Afghanistan's Civil War led to apathy toward ancient landmarks and artifacts in Afghanistan.

Focusing on the Soviets, the Saur Revolution overthrew then-Afghan President Mohammed Daoud Khan in late April 1978. To guard artifacts, they were removed from the Kabul National Museum and placed in hidden sanctuaries throughout the country. The relics needed unique care and

- 16 UNESCO, "Recommendation Concerning the Protection at National Level, of the Cultural and Natural Heritage," *The General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization*, (Paris, 1972), accessed, November 2022, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext>.
- 17 Hadani Ditmars, "Déjà vu All over Again in Afghanistan: Negotiating with the Taliban to Save Heritage Sites," *Middle East Institute* (September 1, 2021), accessed November 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/deja-vu-all-over-again-afghanistan-negotiating-taliban-save-heritage-sites>.
- 18 Bandarin, "Afghanistan: the Historical Sites."
- 19 Sabauon Nasser, "What They Left Behind: The Soviet Union in Afghanistan," *Origins: Current Events in Historical Perspective*, December 2014, https://origins.osu.edu/milestones/december-2014-What-they-left-behind-soviet-union-afghanistan?language_content_entity=en.

preservation because of their age; however, the rush to protect them left little time to follow preservation protocols, resulting in the tarnished and damaged condition of countless historical relics.²⁰ In late 1979, the Soviets—who supported the Saur Revolution—took advantage of the political turmoil to temporarily seize control of Afghanistan out of a desire to control Central Asia to strengthen Soviet domination and its political interests.²¹ In a letter written by Soviet Premier Leonid Il'ich Brezhnev, he explained the absolute urgency, "Most of all, every intervention into the internal affairs of Afghanistan must be prevented, military and other external actions against the people and government of Afghanistan must cease completely."²² While seemingly referring to Afghan nationalists, this ploy gave the Soviets license to destroy anything material against the Soviet cause of socialism and communism.

During their decade-long control, the Soviet Union systematically defaced and demolished museums and historical sites to profit from Afghan history. The ancient ruins of Ai-Khanoum and others were raided and deprived of artifacts for money through the black market. Such items like statues and jewelry had been lost to history through these means.²³ Items from the Kabul National Museum were displaced for their protection or through lootings, while the Hadda Museum was raided and set up in flames.²⁴ In response to the Soviet-caused political and cultural destruction, a 1994 *BBC News* report stated, "Afghanistan may have buried its children, but should not be burying its culture."²⁵ By the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, approximately two million Afghans had perished at the hands of the Soviet military.²⁶

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the subsequent Afghan Civil War that occurred in the power struggle, the Taliban successfully seized

20 Hiebert, "The Lost Worlds of Afghanistan," 35.

21 Kagan et al., *The Western Heritage*, 951.

22 Leonid Il'ich Brezhnev, "Letter to the Chairman of the Social Democratic Party of Germany, Chairman of the Socialist International, Willy Brandt," (March 11, 1980), *Wilson Center Digital Archive*, accessed November 2022, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/letter-chairman-social-democratic-party-germany-chairman-socialist-international-willy>.

23 Bopearachchi, "Vandalised Afghanistan."

24 Hiebert, "The Lost Worlds of Afghanistan," 36.

25 "Unrest in Afghanistan," *BBC News*, London, May 13, 1994, in *At The Crossroads of Asia: A History of the National Museum of Afghanistan*, Omara Khan Massoudi (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2012), 3.

26 Ahmad Shah Masoud, "Letter from Ahmad Shah Masoud to Soviet First Deputy Foreign Minister and Special Afghanistan Envoy Yuli Vorontsov," (September 2, 1989), *Wilson Center Digital Archives*, accessed November 2022, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/letter-ahmad-shah-masoud-soviet-first-deputy-foreign-minister-and-special-afghanistan>.

control of Afghanistan in 1996 and legislated strict Islamic law on its people.²⁷ In a February 2001 edict, Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar ordered:

Based on the verdict of the clergymen and the decision of the Supreme Court of the Islamic Emirate all the statues around Afghanistan must be destroyed. Because God is one God and these statues are there to be worshiped and that is wrong. They should be destroyed so that they are not worshiped now or in the future.²⁸

The Taliban made true to its promise and delegated a specialized task force to destroy statues or any piece of (debatably) idolatrous artwork. There were estimates that approximately three thousand works of ancient art were demolished.²⁹ Taliban scrutiny extended to artworks without any religious connection, as several museum artifacts were reported to the State Administration of Cultural Heritage for black market sale.³⁰

Most notably in their crimes against Afghanistan's cultural heritage, the Taliban was solely responsible for the destruction of the aforementioned Buddhas of Bamiyan, their demise specifically ordered by Taliban leader Omar. The stone rubble and some paintings decorating the Buddhas were later found (for a price) at the Peshawar bazaar, adding further insult to injury.³¹ Where once stood the symbols of inner peace, only a vacuum of space born from religious intolerance remained. However, despite their now-inexistence, the Taliban weaponized their memory to enforce their religion and regime in the eyes of Afghanistan and the world.

Nevertheless, relics of antiquity miraculously survived the Soviets' and Taliban's grasp. During the wars, curators from the Kabul National Museum managed to evacuate artwork to the Central Bank, leading to their rediscovery in 2004.³² In addition, heroic volunteers disguised artifacts in walls and wells to hide their existence. It was highly remarkable that these curators and volunteers protected these relics of history and refused to sell them for their gain, especially considering the priceless works of art—such as gold and jewelry—they were protecting in the face of war and poverty.³³

Following the Taliban's reemergence to power in Afghanistan in 2021 after

27 Kagan et al., *The Western Heritage*, 975.

28 Mounir Bouchenaki, "Safeguarding the Buddha Statues in Bamiyan and the Sustainable Protection of Afghan Cultural Heritage," in Masanori Nagaoka, ed., *The Future of the Bamiyan Buddha Statues: Heritage Reconstruction in Theory and Practice*, (Paris: UNESCO & Springer, 2020), 19-30.

29 Hiebert, "The Lost Worlds of Afghanistan," 39.

30 Ibid., 49.

31 Bopearachchi, "Vandalised Afghanistan."

32 Hiebert, "The Lost Worlds of Afghanistan," 17.

33 Ibid., 13.

the 18-month withdrawal of stationed United States troops, the Taliban worked to negotiate a moderate stance in contrast to their nineties predecessors, according to an *NPR* interview from Taliban spokesperson Suhail Shaheen.³⁴ Focusing on cultural matters in a different *NPR* interview, a Taliban political sector spokesperson, Muhammad Naeem Wardak, issued claims that the Taliban would now work to protect – and even research – historical sites and artifacts, stating:

The Minister of Education and the acting Minister of Information were present with us in the negotiations. They have begun their research in different provinces. For example, they went to Kandahar, Herat, and other provinces, they want to preserve those ancient monuments found in museums and other places, so we want to preserve all of this. They are part of our history and part of the identity of the Afghan people, and you know the Afghan people have a long history dating back to about 5,000 years. So, we will preserve this, and we have no problem with heritage and historical monuments.³⁵

Nonetheless, the promises were easy. Although the Taliban promised full pardons to those previously allied with the United States, within days of their takeover, reports of stalking and abuse towards political ‘dissenters’ filled the media.³⁶ An attempt to demonstrate a balanced image of cultural acceptance would have benefited the Taliban, for they would have gained global recognition and potential support. Even so, opposing groups in the Taliban with varying extreme to moderate intentions made it challenging to discern what path they ultimately followed in the future.³⁷ In an October 2022 interview with China Global Television Network, the National Museum of Afghanistan curator, Mohamed Fahim Rahimi, stated, “For now we do not have any concern regarding the security of the National Museum of

34 Suhail Shaheen, “Read What The Taliban Told NPR About Their Plans For Afghanistan.” Interview by Steve Inskeep. August 18, 2021. *National Public Radio*. <https://www.npr.org/2021/08/18/1028780816/transcript-taliban-spokesman-suhail-shaheen-interview>.

35 Muhammad Naeem Wardak, “What the Taliban really want from the world, in their own words.” Interview by Hannah Bloch and Fatma Tanis (December 15, 2021) *NPR*. Accessed November 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2021/12/15/1064001076/taliban-afghanistan-girls-education-womens-rights>.

36 Suhail Shaheen, “Read What The Taliban Told NPR About Their Plans For Afghanistan,” (August 18, 2021), *NPR*, accessed November 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2021/08/18/1028780816/transcript-taliban-spokesmansuhail-shaheen-interview>.

37 Bandarin, “Afghanistan: the Historical Sites.”

Afghanistan. It is protected by the government..."³⁸ Considering Rahimi was under Taliban rule at the time, he likely had been coerced into giving this statement to maintain the moderate agenda this generation of Taliban tried to portray, rendering his assurances questionable.

UNESCO's efforts to secure the World Heritage sites amidst the insurrection proved paradoxically both tenuous and stable. As of late 2022, UNESCO instituted a Transitional Engagement Framework designed to immediately transfer resources toward Afghan refugees and ensure damage was not wrought on historic landmarks during the turmoil. However, UNESCO's blatant refusal to recognize the Taliban government as legitimate potentially caused the Taliban to retaliate against their preservation efforts.³⁹ Only the passage of time told whether the landmarks were safe against reprisals.

Honestly, it is intriguing to ponder why the Soviet Union and the Taliban did not strategically use their newly acquired historical landscapes as propaganda to showcase the achievements of their conquests. Historical figures often gazed back with nostalgia upon the glories of the past to garner a shared history and strength for the current regime—a classic example is that of Italian dictator Benito Mussolini's fascination with ancient Rome. Mussolini highly desired Rome as the station of shifting histories from which Italy molded a new 'glorious' fascist future.⁴⁰ In his autobiography, Mussolini frequently vouched for the virtues of ancient Rome and viewed its historical monuments as a testament to Italy's destiny of excellence, "By isolating the monuments of ancient Rome, the relation between the ancient Romans and the Italians is made more beautiful and suggestive."⁴¹

Indeed, it is curious how this method of thinking was not applied to Afghanistan. In times of war and poverty, this reminder of golden times could be especially poignant to survivors and translated admiration towards the regime—removing dissent towards the government and finally allowing for peace. In terms of Afghanistan, however, these monuments representing the very ideals of cultural diversity presented a setback to the Soviet's and Taliban's goals. It was to the Soviet's and Taliban's advantage to erase the ancient cultural landmarks of Afghanistan to create a new identity, whether this be a matter of communism or radical fundamentalist Islamism, and

38 Mohamed Fahim Rahimi, "National Museum of Afghan remains bastion of country's rich heritage despite conflict." Interview by Zmaryalai Abasin. October 6, 2022. *YouTube*, CGTN. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NGIYaAK_o5o&list=LL&index=2.

39 Angela Davic, "UNESCO Continues Preservation of Afghanistan's Heritage Sites," *The Collector*, accessed June 2023, <https://www.thecollector.com/unesco-continues-preservation-of-afghanistans-heritage-sites/>.

40 Benito Mussolini, *My Autobiography* (n.p: Borodino Books, 1928), 189.

41 *Ibid.*, 295.

prevented the people from practicing old beliefs. Removing these landmarks strengthened the beliefs of the regimes to remove the temptation of old ways and to secure their regime's perpetuity and power through force. In particular, the Taliban forbade the Buddhas of Bamiyan to remain because, in their worldview, the 'temptations' of Buddhism or other religions posed a serious threat as they desired to force severe Islamic practices on its people. Therefore, the Buddhas of Bamiyan needed to be vanquished and forgotten through the force of dynamite and the immensity of time.

In a matter of decades, thousands of historical sites and cultural artifacts existing since antiquity ceased to remain. From vandalism, theft, and destruction, parts of Afghanistan's history were unrecoverably lost to its people and the world's history.⁴² The motto of the Kabul Museum, "A nation stays alive when its culture stays alive," imparted an important lesson to the world: the significance and necessity for historical and cultural preservation.⁴³ The artifacts and architecture from historical sites such as Aikhanoum and the city of Herat allowed the world a deeper understanding of the Grecian Hellenistic periods and the ancient kingdoms of Afghanistan. The lack of primary documents and oral histories meant the remains of these cities were the sole basis of our knowledge concerning these periods and regions. The erosion of the cultural heritage of Afghanistan threatened to splinter the identity of its people.

In essence, the *Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique's* director of research, Osmund Bopearachchi, perhaps expressed the solemnities best:

The world owes its most profound sympathies to the Afghan people, who were chased from one frontier to another and who suffered the vicissitudes of civil war, famine, and drought. They were the hapless victims of political ideologies that reduce the human condition to a position subordinate to international economic interests. But in promoting the cynical game of realpolitik in Afghanistan, humankind itself has lost a part of its collective cultural heritage - a loss for which the world bears collective responsibility.⁴⁴

Ultimately, Afghanistan faced the gravest sorrows in perhaps its darkest hour. These political ideologies robbed Afghanistan and its people not only of their autonomy but also of their identities, along with their political control relinquished to countries seeking to exploit them. As a part of their Afghan propaganda campaigns and agenda control, the Soviets and the Taliban

42 Bandarín, "Afghanistan: the Historical Sites."

43 Hiebert, "The Lost Worlds of Afghanistan," 23.

44 Bopearachchi, "Vandalised Afghanistan."

ruthlessly destroyed historical landmarks and relics. In spaces of victorious monuments, only rubble and money long spent was left in memory of its people. Despairingly, the Taliban once again gained command of Afghanistan – its future and the fate of their people remain unknown. As of 2023, the world has again turned its back on Afghanistan.

