



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



United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women

Carpet-making in Central Asia has typically been dominated by women since the creation of the Pazyryk Carpet to the present day. Carpet weaving was most accessible to Afghan women because it arose out of economic necessity and their confinement to their homes. 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 Soviet-Afghan War began when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979. The United States and other nations supported the mujahideen "freedom fighters" who fought against the Soviet invaders. The Soviet puppet government in Kabul 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 Pazyryk Carpet

Uncovered in permafrost in 1949 at an archaeological tomb expedition in the Altai Mountains, the Pazyryk Carpet is the key to understanding the significance of carpet weaving throughout the history of Central Asia. The weaving process employed by Afghan women in the modern-day can be traced back to the era of the Pazyryk Carpet. This textile served as a methodological blueprint for weavers throughout Central Asia.



Oral Testimony from Afghan Women

"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."

"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."

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 are 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.



The Soviet-Afghan War in Numbers

800,000 Afghans fled to Pakistan within six months of the Soviet invasion
200,000 Afghans fled to Iran by the end of 1979
90,000 mujahideen fighters died between 1979 and 1989

This conflict prompted Afghan women to incorporate symbols of violence into their textiles unlike ever before. Women weavers were inspired to produce carpets that reflected their immediate surroundings.

Author: Abigail Turano

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Margaret Manchester, Department of History and Classics