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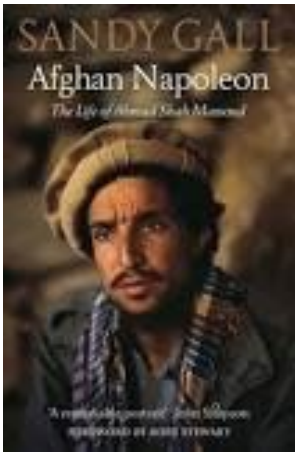

Sandy Gall, *Afghan Napoleon: The Life of Ahmad Shah Massoud*. London: Haus Publishing, 2021.

Ioan Tuleasca

Ahmad Shah Massoud was "a patriot who fought for a united and free Afghanistan" (xviii). Peter Tomsen, former United States special envoy to Afghanistan, expressed his unbound admiration for the Afghan leader by saying "'Massoud was unique, one of the most remarkable of the many leaders I had met during my thirty-two-year career in the State Department" (300). However, the accolade that epitomises Massoud's prowess as a leader, strategist, politician and astute organiser comes from Rober Kaplan, who "famously describe him in the *Wall Street Journal* as 'the Afghan who won the Cold War'" (180). Additionally, Kaplan reinforces Massoud's exceptional

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gifts, stating that "He must be judged among the greatest guerrilla leaders of the 20th century, shoulder to shoulder with Marshal Tito, Ho Chi Minh, Mao Tse-tung, and Che Guevara. He organised a functioning polity over a sprawling, more difficult terrain, that was under greater military pressure, than those of Mao, Ho, Tito or Che. Most significant, Mr Massoud accomplished this without a severe ideology and its accompanying human rights violations" (180-181).

Ahmad Shah Massoud, born in September 1953 in Jangalak, Panjsher Valley, was the son of a Royal Afghan Army career officer, Colonel Dost Mohammad, and of Bibi Khorshaid, "his modern-minded wife" (19). His formative years were influenced by both the complex cultural Afghan environment and by his exposure to a French educational milieu, as he attended and successfully graduated from "arguably the best school in Afghanistan, the famous Lycée Esteqlal ('Independence High School')" in Kabul (20). Against his wishes that favoured a military career, his family decided he should follow instead a technical profession, in the form of joining Kabul Polytechnic Institute and pursuing Architectural studies, which he did for a couple of years, until 1973 (24-25). What had always been a salient feature of his personality, which gave him the means to endure adversity and project "'grace and radiance'" (306-307) as he viewed his father had, was "the strength of his piety" (23), a fundamental trait that he would always profess. "I decided to commend my life to God and to serve Islam," he said, acknowledging that "I have had no other duty except for the work of God and Islam" (149).

Triggered by the lust for power of Prince Daoud, who dethroned King Zahir Shah on 17 July 1973 and proclaimed himself President in a coup d'état that benefitted from the support of communist-sympathising military officers (25), Afghanistan's civil society was thrown into turmoil. What followed was almost fifty years of instability, trauma, civil war and extremist trends that transformed a once prosperous, stable, traditionalist country into a wasteland of unimaginable proportions. This is the background the Lyon of Panjsher (51), Ahmad Shah Massoud, operated in, trying to create a democratic, moderate Islamic republic (201), with means that never matched the task, and adversities that were rooted in the strategic considerations and political ambitions of neighbouring countries and included other Islamic polities and organisations with specific agendas.

Sandy Gall, the author of this poetic, rather than strictly factual/chronological biography, is an accomplished, long-serving journalist, having been on the front lines of various conflicts, and interviewing historical personalities since the start of the second half of the 20th century (ix). He developed a bond with both Massoud and Afghanistan that eventuated in numerous interviews with the "'national hero of Afghanistan'" (xi) and promoting the interests of this war-torn country by publishing "deeply informed articles and books about the country" (x) and creating and running, along with his family, a "remarkable charity for Afghans who had lost limbs, providing aids, prosthetics, and therapy" (x). His harsh pronouncements regarding the political situation in Afghanistan and the mistakes made by Western polities in evaluating the ways of engagement and eventually picking the wrong course of action for stabilizing the situation (180, 185, 196-197, 227), add to his ability to invite comments and reactions from individual players (223, 266, 310-311), that put into perspective the West's inability to ascertain how valuable Massoud would have been if thoroughly supported in his aims.

Gall comments that "To my mind, the failure of the West – especially the Americans and the British – to support Massoud in that final period from the mid-nineties onwards was not only shameful, but was politically inept and, indeed, disastrous" (311) and his subsequently derived consequences should the West have supported Massoud (312), provide the reader with a thorough image of the depth this biographer understood the situation on the ground and subsequent international consequences. For his account, Gall benefitted from conversations with Massoud's family members and close associates, as well as from some of Massoud's diaries, that "reveal him to be quite exceptionally reflective, sometimes poetic, and, above all, a strategic thinker, on a par perhaps with Babur, the founder of the Mughal Empire, whose fifteenth-century memoirs are a literary phenomenon" (313).

As for Ahmad Shah Massoud's association with the famed French Emperor and commander, Napoleon Bonaparte, everything started during the Soviet invasion and subsequent occupation of Afghanistan, when "Gerry Warner, the newly appointed Far East controller of Britain's Secret Intelligence Service (MI6)" (4), decided to find an worthy opponent to the Russian invasion and tasks one of his officers to check the situation on the ground to find a personality who was similar to "'Napoleon when he is

still an artillery officer'" (4). Having found Massoud, lines of communications and support were opened, and agreement was obtained from the US, even if they decided to pursue a different course of action than the British. Now, the comparison between Napoleon and Massoud is not a straightforward one, given their totally different cultural, political and strategic backgrounds. Even their (military) education was fundamentally different, Massoud self-teaching himself in terms of warfare and guerrilla tactics (28), whereas Napoleon pursued a pure military career, graduating from famous military academies in Brienne and Paris, France. Hence, what was natural for Napoleon, that is the fundamental principle of relentlessly confronting the enemy on the battlefield until the war ended, aiming at annihilating them and achieving the culmination point of victory, was rather alien for Massoud, who would always try to negotiate a political solution with his opponents, even if he clearly had the upper hand, like in 1992, after conquering Kabul (179). Another major difference related to the quest for power, which for Massoud aligned only with promoting the interests of Afghanistan, and building adequate governance systems to achieve internal and external stability, whereas for Napoleon took control of France (First Consul in 1799 and Emperor in 1804) and militarily enforcing its dominance/interests abroad. As a point in case, Massoud did not have a will for power in itself, relinquishing his position of Defence Minister in the Rabbani Government in June 1993 to enable the creation of a different governing structure that included one of his bitter rivals, as a means to project/achieve national unity and enable peace. The altruism exhibited on that occasion only reinforces Massoud's fine human qualities, that included utmost respect for his fellow men. He said “We are all equal. We are all human” (261), and he had compassion (xiii, 88-89, 272) and an unmitigated courage (216), in Gall's opinion. However, the most salient feature of his personality is epitomised by his relentless "fight for freedom," which is acutely reflected in his diaries. He wrote “We fight for freedom. For me, the worst thing would be to live a slave. You can have everything: to eat, to drink, clothes, a roof, a place to stay; but if you do not have freedom, if you do not have pride, if you are not independent, then all that has no taste, or value” (239).

True to his pronouncements, during his April 2001 visit to Europe at the invitation of Nicole Fontaine, at that time the President of the European Parliament, Massoud emphasized that “We have not asked, and we don’t need military personnel or foreign troops to defend our land, the people of Afghanistan are ready to resist and

defend their land, but of course that resistance requires support" (272). Additionally, Massoud gave a prescient warning to the leaders of the free world, stating that "'My message to President [George W.] Bush is the following: If peace is not re-established in Afghanistan, if he doesn't help the Afghan people, it is certain that the problem of Afghanistan will also affect the United States and a lot of other countries … Their objectives are not limited to Afghanistan,' he said. 'They consider Afghanistan as the first phase to a long-term objective in the region and beyond'" (271).

Ahmad Shah Massoud fought the Russians for almost ten years until they left Afghanistan in February 1989, organized the Northern Alliance and defeated the communist regime in Afghanistan, seizing Kabul in 1992, and organized the resistance against the Taliban by creating the United Front as a political solution to fight extremism and promote democracy. However his means did not match his ideals of enabling "the participation of the people in decision-making" (202) and the creation of "a framework which could be made to lead to democracy, a parliamentary system" (201), a framework that would eventuate in a "moderate Islamic Government" (204).

Massoud was assassinated in September 2001, two days before the 11 September al Qaeda-led attacks on US soil, which eventuated in US intervention in Afghanistan and the removal of the Taliban and their allies from power. The Scotland Yard inquiry into Massoud's death was halted due to external interferences, as "Pakistan's president, Musharraf, had asked Britain to drop the investigation" (305). Nevertheless, Gall's description of the events leading to Massoud's death offers a clear picture of the actors who conspired to kill one of the most remarkable sons of Afghanistan, whose people will forever remember and whose memory is already celebrated in a variety of ways. For example, "His photo – twenty times life-size – is the first thing you see on arriving at Kabul's airport. The main traffic circle in the city is named after him, there is a national holiday in his honour, and his mausoleum looms over his native valley, larger than the Tomb of Cyrus at Pasargadae. He is the 'national hero of Afghanistan'" (xi).

Gall poetically summarizes the untimely death of the Hero of Afghanistan by saying "One of the shining lights of Afghanistan – and of the world – was thus extinguished in a cruel and senseless murder that impoverished not only his large and loving family, and Afghanistan itself, but the whole of the civilised world" (298). In Gall's view, a bridge between cultures and civilisations was destroyed by hatred and

intolerance (300, 303), by inept policies and inaction (xiii, 311), as well as by political short-sightedness and prejudice (225-226). The consequences are felt even today, when Afghanistan's social construct is in desperate need of a shining light of wisdom and tolerance, rectitude and talent, a historical personality in the guise of a "rare human being" (xv) to emulate Ahmad Shah Massoud and articulate his united vision for all peoples of Afghanistan.

Ioan Tuleasca, former Senior Lecturer in Electrical Engineering, decided to follow a different professional line of work and successfully completed two qualifications with Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, to this effect. The first one, a Graduate Diploma in International Relations, was a stepping stone for the Master of Strategic Studies acquired in 2021, whose dissertation introduced the concept of a military-industrial-financial system as a solution to the contemporary global stress factors that affect the rules-based international order.