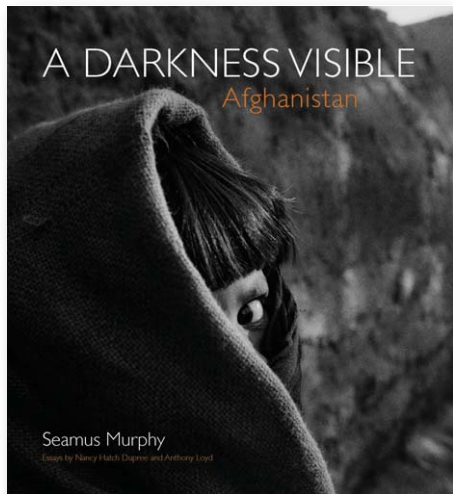


# Book Reviews

**Reza Deghati** applauds the work of fellow photographer Seamus Murphy in *A Darkness Visible*, **Lucy Gordon** admires a portrait of dysfunctional lives in Afghanistan, **Bijan Omrani** ponders *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush* and **Summer Coish** laments nuclear destruction in Kazakhstan. Meanwhile, **Mitch Albert** remembers Afghanistan when the going was good and **Katie Hickman** enjoys the spirit of expat revolution



## A DARKNESS VISIBLE

Seamus Murphy, with essays by Nancy Hatch Dupree and Anthony Loyd  
Saqi 2008  
175 pp, £40

FOR MANY YEARS, THE DARK CLOUDS OF war and injustice have covered Afghanistan. Political power struggles have rendered the Afghan people victims of one of the darkest histories of recent times. I have travelled in this ancient country for thirty years, working as a photographer and becoming engaged in humanitarian activities, and three distinct eras stand out:

First, the Soviet invasion in 1979: for almost ten years, the Soviet military waged war against the Afghan people. A large, powerful and well-equipped army battled one of the world's most defenceless countries.

The next era came after the fall of the Russian army in 1989 and the empowerment of the Afghan mujahideen. This was the starting point for an even darker era and the beginning of a civil war in which – again – outsiders (like Pakistan and Iran) meddled in Afghan affairs for their own benefit, making this tired nation's dream of freedom more remote still.

The third era came with the arrival of the US, which had been preparing the field since 1992. It aimed to fulfil a long-stated mission to establish a strong military presence in the

country, allowing it greater reach in its geopolitical games with Russia, China and Iran and providing improved access to the oil and natural gas resources of the Caspian Sea. The US had helped finance and arm the mujahideen and encouraged the influx of radical Islamist fighters to join the anti-Soviet resistance – factors that eventually created and emboldened the Taliban. The US believed that, with the help of Pakistan, covert assistance to this small group of extremists would render them pliable puppets, allowing de facto control of Afghanistan. The results were not as predicted, and in 2001 the US initiated a war in order to remove the very people they had helped to power. Once again, families were torn apart. The war continues to this day, pursued despite history's warnings to foreign invaders of Afghanistan.

Throughout these uncertain and dangerous times, photographers and journalists have continued to document what has been taking place. The civil war and the rule of the Taliban were not considered remarkable enough to justify meaningful Western mainstream media news coverage, so journalists faced two different battles prior to 2001: the struggle to stay alive and the pressure of dealing with editors who had no interest in publishing their work. After the 9/11 attacks, the world's attention turned to Afghanistan, which the US had implicated in the violence. The streets of Kabul were quickly filled with photographers and journalists, and the country was once again thrust into the spotlight. But from the very beginning, in the 1980s, a small number of photographers and journalists had chosen to live and work among the Afghans, who were uncertain about their future but bravely fighting for a brighter one.

Among those few photographers who shared their subjects' years of suffering and fear was Seamus Murphy, whose remarkable work is a testament to his close relationship with Afghanistan and its people. We might have crossed the same mountain pass, shared the fatigue of walking for days or rested in the same rifle pit, but we never saw each other in action. More importantly, however, what astonishes me as a fellow photographer is his power in capturing the true soul of the place, namely the

Afghan people's mix of pain, grief, happiness, pride and ability to rebuild and continue living.

During my career and throughout my experience of living in Afghanistan, there have been very few bodies of work or single images from that country that have moved me as deeply and touched my heart as Murphy's. He is without a doubt one of the very few photographers whose work from Afghanistan, the result of a deep understanding and passion, transcends photographic technique, composition and tonality. Instead, by using the art of photography at its most professional level, he takes viewers of his work beyond the subject; by dragging us inside the images, he urges us to think about humanity, human rights and the story of the Afghans and their melancholy history. His work takes a big step towards breaking boundaries, building a relationship between viewer and subject but also sparking a new philosophical debate about the use of photography and the image. With astonishing and remarkable use of the camera, Murphy enchants his viewers, transferring his own experiences and feelings to them. One notable example is the moving photograph of the little girl that is the cover of this book. It is a powerful image that evokes a deep story, the story of her life and her nation, as well as Murphy's close affiliation with those towards whom he points his camera.

This successful attempt to portray the lives of Afghans by sharing their passions and fears sees Murphy take his place alongside the other masters of world photojournalism. I profoundly hope that his exceptional work can focus the world's attention to the ongoing tragedy of Afghanistan and be seen for what it is: a brave individual attempt to prevent ignorance and forgetfulness. □

**Reza Deghati** is an Iranian photojournalist with French citizenship. In a career spanning thirty years, he has worked for a host of international publications including *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Geo* and *National Geographic*. He is the founder of Aina ([www.ainaworld.org](http://www.ainaworld.org)), an organisation helping to revive and promote independent media development and children's education in Afghanistan.