

BOOK REVIEWS/CENTRAL ASIA

Lyse Doucet. *The Finest Hotel in Kabul: A People's History of Afghanistan*. Penguin Random House, 2025. 448 pages. Hardcover, \$29.00.

Annika Schmeding, Ph.D.^{1,2} 

¹ NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, ² Universiteit van Amsterdam

Keywords: Afghanistan, Kabul, Howard Zinn, people's history, social history, counterhegemony, journalism

<https://doi.org/10.18874/ac.85.1.20>

Asian Ethnology

Vol. 85, Issue 1, 2026

This book review examines Lyse Doucet's *The Finest Hotel in Kabul: A People's History of Afghanistan*, an account of Kabul's Inter-Continental Hotel from its 1969 opening through five decades of war and political upheaval. Drawing on her own long experience in Afghanistan as a BBC journalist, Doucet centers Afghan hotel workers and their lives in an empathetic social history. While Doucet offers a sensitive account of ordinary Afghans, the review argues that this constitutes social history rather than a people's history in the Zinnian sense, committed to structural critique and emancipatory politics, and raises the question of what a genuinely counterhegemonic history of Afghanistan might look like.

The Finest Hotel in Kabul: A People's History of Afghanistan is an eminently readable account of Kabul's Inter-Continental Hotel since its opening in 1969. Originally bankrolled by the British government and private investors, which embroiled it early on in a diplomatic spat over rentier politics, the "Inter-Con" quickly established itself as a place for elite parties and international travelers before accommodating various political players over the last half century of war and political turmoil. At various times through its volatile history, it has seen mujaheddin fighters as well as Taliban ministers. It has housed Osama bin Laden as well as Afghanistan's politicians and presidents.

Lyse Doucet has lived through some of this history herself, beginning in 1988 as a hotel guest when she first arrived in Afghanistan as a young journalist and later as a documentarian, gathering stories of the staff and people whose lives were intimately connected to it. True to her pedigree as an accomplished radio journalist for the BBC, the book, rather than written to be read, is written to be read out loud. Her writing is honed by an attention to sound and behind every sentence is the distinct cadence of her voice. The audio version of the book is read by Doucet herself.

The starting point of the book is the reality of life for many foreign correspondents—living in hotels for long stretches with the staff becoming somewhat of an extended family. Doucet, however, does not do what many journalists have done in their writing about Afghanistan: center themselves and their own starry-eyed discoveries. Instead, she centers the Afghans with whom she interacts, sustaining a third-person voice by referring to herself using an amalgamated one-word name, "LyseDoucet," which is at times humorous and at others awkward, as she keeps her interiority largely concealed, perhaps a lingering habit from decades as a journalist.

Key to this book is that it is written for international audiences. Hotels are contained spaces that can be easily envisioned. They can be outlooks, as in the case of the Inter-Con, which, from its perch on a hilltop, literally offers a vantage point from which to observe Afghanistan's changing fortunes, a place to shelter when atrocities come to haunt the city's inhabitants, as well as a place to sympathize with its workers and guests. The hotel offers the chance to highlight aspects of Afghan life that are often underappreciated in outsider accounts, such as its music and culture or its sumptuous food, from chicken kebabs and lamb *karahi*, to the national dish *qabuli pulao* topped with sweet raisins, almonds, and carrots, to perfectly plump packages of *ashak* and *mantu* dumplings. The book has a knack for making one's mouth water. It is also a perceptive way to showcase one of the aspects of life that Afghans are most famous for: hospitality.

Despite Afghanistan's reputation for being a prime example of the "war on terror" and an empire-repelling underdog that fights off any invader, an Orientalist trope that has been unpacked and criticized elsewhere (Manchanda 2020), for anyone who has even a cursory understanding of the country, it is legendary for its invitations and hosts who put the rest of the world to shame; from friends fighting each other to pay restaurant bills, to hosts gifting jewelry to their dinner guests to thank them for having blessed their house, to even the poorest refugee offering tea to visitors sitting down in their tent. Having tasted Afghanistan's hospitality, one can never shake the shame of seeing how Afghans are treated these days—a period of fraught immigration politics—as undesirables by countries of the Global North as well as their immediate neighbors. But a hotel centers hospitality, and the ones who extend it to anyone crossing its doorstep.

The book introduces us to the staff at the hotel. We are greeted by front desk manager Sadeq and his "megawatt smile" taking care of the hotel on a Saturday night in 2021 as the Taliban advance on the city. We follow waiter Hazrat, who tended to guests for decades at the hotel, as he tries his hand as a cocktail mixer during the 1970s, struggles to adjust to the new, more rowdy mujaheddin guests of the late 1980s, and takes off his necktie, now banned, and adjusts his Islamic salutation to the Taliban rulers in the 1990s. We get to hope for a better life and upward mobility for many of them, such as Malalai, the first female server at the hotel's restaurant and her family's only earner since she was twelve years old, and how her dreams are crushed at the Taliban's return, when she is ordered to stay home. Through these stories we learn about the lives and worries of the individuals as we follow them in their daily activities at the hotel, such as restocking the breakfast buffet, laundering towels, debating renovations, and seeing how they experience political changes.

Doucet's ground-up account of Afghanistan's history from the perspective of the Inter-Con also raises an important question: is the book really a "people's history," as its subtitle suggests, by dint of writing about common people, or is it more accurately a social history? And why does that difference matter? People's history is originally a Marxist historiographic approach that emerged in the 1960s, which shifted focus from traditional elite-centered narratives ("great man" history) to recover the experiences, agency, and voices of workers, women, racial and ethnic minorities, and groups often excluded from conventional histories. It is nonhegemonic history, and with that it is a history that states often don't want to tell. For instance, Howard Zinn's (1980) famous study reframes Columbus's arrival by centering the experiences of violence, enslavement, and genocide of the indigenous Arawak people rather than celebrating European "discovery."

While people's history is a form of social history, not all social history is people's history. As an umbrella term, social history can be analytically neutral or descriptive without necessarily adopting a critical stance toward power. By contrast, people's history is inherently political in adopting explicit commitments to advance progressive or radical emancipatory interpretations of historical change. If seen from the social history vantage point, Doucet's book does include various classes of Afghans. Doucet's account offers awareness of how events ripple through individual lives that each carry weight and dignity. The focus on creating empathy across class lines is often neglected not only in journalistic accounts of Afghanistan but also in academic ones. It humanizes historical moments by seeing them through the eyes of ordinary people. But a people's history—in the sense of Zinn—it is not. Indeed, the choice of setting and the characters portrayed, the working class of a luxury hotel, must be interpreted within the context of Afghanistan's overall class structure where they are, comparatively, part of a burgeoning middle class.

Rather than criticizing Doucet for a subtitle she may not have written herself (after all, few journalists actually choose the headlines for their own stories), dwelling on the question of what a people's history of Afghanistan would entail is crucial. How would a history be told differently from the vantage point of Hazara protestors in the Enlightenment Movement, transnational women's organizers, or political prisoners and the families who endured enforced disappearances? How could our understanding be revised through a fundamental reorientation toward social justice and structural change if told from the vantage point of labor organizers in their struggles or the dispossessed who had to give up land claims when the war economy made it lucrative for strongmen to grab Kabul real estate? How would victimization in war look if seen not only through the eyes of victims of the Taliban's suicide attacks but also of US/NATO drone and bombing violence? How would it need to change when including the transnational view—from Afghan traders and refugees who connected regional cities? Or told infused with the wisdom of Afghan intellectuals and religious leaders engaged in lively debates?

The problem is not that writing a people's history of Afghanistan is impossible, nor that *The Finest Hotel in Kabul* does not get us there. The problem is that the kind of history the book gestures toward—on class dynamics and multilayered perspectives on social change—remains largely absent from the narratives most accessible to Western readers. Doucet offers an engaging social history of the Inter-Con and the Afghans who sustained it through decades of upheaval. In doing so, she humanizes a country too often reduced to abstraction or violence. But while the hotel allows Afghans to appear as hosts, workers, and cultural interlocutors, it does not easily accommodate them as historical actors making claims on power, justice, or redress. Read in this light, the book's subtitle does important, if unintended, work. It points to what is still lacking from the public record of Afghanistan.

Submitted: April 21, 2026 JST. Accepted: May 08, 2026 JST. Published: August 25, 2026 JST.



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CCBY-4.0). View this license's legal deed at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0> and legal code at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode> for more information.

REFERENCES

- Manchanda, Nivi. 2020. *Imagining Afghanistan: The History and Politics of Imperial Knowledge*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108867986>.
- Zinn, Howard. 1980. *A People's History of the United States*. Longman.