On Peace Activists and Skilled Survivors

Afghan Exiles and Transnational History-Making from Below

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Abstract

This article examines multiple entanglements of Afghan exiles' biographies in West Germany with Cold War- and contemporary history. The life stories of six men who have been residing in Germany since the 1970s but were physically and cognitively highly mobile in their engagement for change in Afghanistan highlight the role of human agency in transnational history-making. The analysis shows that during the time of intense engagement connecting West Germany and Afghanistan, their lives became truly transnational, and the vernacular cosmopolitanism they practised has shaped transnational history from below. While all six life stories mirror transgressive biographies in connection with wartime events and differ from the global cosmopolitanism of elites, these life courses are neither standardised nor linear. The findings point to three types of transgressive biographies—skilled survivors, quietists and masters of crossover—that have preserved the transnational dimension that had been so significant earlier in the exiles' lives to varying degrees and differed regarding related perceptions of failure, loss and regret.

Keywords

transnational history(-making) – transgressive biographies – agency – Cold War – Afghanistan – Germany

1   Introduction

Afghans[1] are a global nation (Crews 2015) and homo itinerans (Monsutti 2021), not only since the latest refugee movements in 2021 and 2015 or the one following the 1978 revolution. Despite Afghan globalism and the manifold complex interactions and flows between Afghanistan and the world, including the settlement of millions of Afghans outside of Asia, Afghans have been hardly given a voice as co-constituents of shared spaces of living, working, researching and future-making. Their influence and voices have remained marginally represented in social science scholarship and recent history writing. Albeit limited in scope and representativeness, this article puts forward six life stories of Afghan men to examine the multiple entanglements of Afghan exiles' biographies in Germany with Cold War- and contemporary history.

The investigation is conducted against the backdrop of what is usually labelled 'the Afghan conflict', i.e., the upheaval and violent events in the country since the Marxist coup d'état of 1978. However, acknowledging Afghan globalism (Crews 2015: 2) as an interpretative background folio for Afghan history, the past 40 years of war cannot be reduced to internal strife, interventions and resistance but are embedded in global ideological struggles, international geopolitics and the expansion of capitalism, all of which have (re)produced inequalities and caused power shifts that have affected all segments of Afghan society and their global outlook.

The aim of this article is to elaborate evidence on transnational history-making 'from below' by tracing the transnational entanglements of selected Afghans with the help of oral history, focussing on a unique group of interlocutors who do not fit the category of carefree elites wandering between Afghanistan and Western countries. Europe was an early destination for the elite strata—global cosmopolitans—of Afghan society; West Germany accepted the most Afghans worldwide in the 1980s. More recently, asylum options for Afghans in Europe have decreased, with 'ordinary cosmopolitanism' (Agier 2016) having become the forced condition of an increasing number of people on the move. The six interlocutors who speak through this article, however, represent what Bhabha (1996) referred to as 'vernacular cosmopolitans' whose transnational movements and agency are not directly but rather indirectly connected to the centres of power in the locations of previous or current settle-

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1   The term 'Afghans' is used here (for shortage of space) in an admittedly homogenising manner as a collective term for a large number of different ethnic, religious, social (including tribal) group collectives inhabiting or originating from the territory of today's Afghanistan in the past and present.

ment. Against the backdrop of war and their involvement in attempts at ending the conflict in Afghanistan in one way or another, their cosmopolitanism adds a notion of discrepancy (Clifford 1992: 108) to the usual binaries of here and there, us and them, linear life courses versus life stories marked by ruptures and setbacks.

Focusing on such transgressive biographies allows to establish an innovative approach towards understanding transnational history-making (Logemann 2015). Instead of looking at elite exile figures who constituted the immediate circle around the Afghan King and his government bureaucracy, looking through the lens of representatives of a cohort subordinate to their fathers' elite group-belonging, allows us to capture views of the traditionally marginalised voices of exile society, i.e., Afghans in West Germany. Their transgressive biographies result from unusual paths, where in both—origin and settlement—contexts, they have gone beyond the ordinary and challenged conventional norms and benchmarks regarding how to engage in politics. In the cases presented below, interlocutors have been breaking new ground in engaging transnationally for mainly two reasons. One, because of the extraordinary new situation of the war in Afghanistan from the late 1970s onwards, and the other—in part even a decade before the war—because they rebelled against their fathers' generation, became politicised or became aware of the inequalities and power differentials in Afghan society. What is more, they were convinced that not only could they contribute to mitigating these ills—each interlocutor in his own way in line with his positionality—but that they also had an obligation 'to do something' and not question their power and ability to act (agency).

I obtained these six life stories selected for this article in the framework of a broader research project on peacemaking potentials and capacities of Afghans in West Germany (cf. Meininghaus/Mielke 2019), during which I conducted narrative biographic interviews with Afghans about their engagement for and in Afghanistan from exile. I interviewed them face to face between 2018 and 2020 and sometimes with several follow-up meetings to capture the individual (hi)stories and reflections. Given that 'Afghans know each other' and that a detailed account of the individual life stories would compromise the interview partners' identity, the analysis features abstractions from the sample of the six cases to protect the interviewees and keep them anonymous.[2] Nevertheless, I argue that the following illustration of how the six Afghans interpret and comprehend their past and present life and how they presented themselves and

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2 For purposes of confidentiality and protection of the interviewees, I decided to avoid interview designations throughout the article because the combination of several interview excerpts would result in coherent pictures of the individuals' life courses.

behaved when talking to a white female researcher who was born around the time that they engaged in their first political activities, will help us gain a better understanding of the complexity and multi-layeredness of transnationally entangled history.

2   Tracing Transnational History through Individual Life Courses and Human Agency

This section briefly clarifies the concepts and theoretical background the analysis relies on, including the methodological consequences. I hold that transnational history and biographic research benefit from a social constructivist approach that rejects an overly structural emphasis but sees the world—including history and individual life courses—shaped through constant dynamic interactions of creation, reproduction and change in a process perspective (Berger/Luckmann 1963). Concretely, and relevant for this research, it implies that individual life courses and historical processes co-constitute each other.

Most generally, transnational history is understood as a relational perspective on the flow and linkages between different entities of human social and political organisation. As Iriye and Saunier (2009: xviii) formulated, these links and flows refer to 'people, ideas, products, processes and patterns that operate over, across, through, beyond, above, under, or in-between polities and societies'. In this article, I refer to transnational history as the product and transnational history-making as the process of activities by individuals who are carriers of the in-between: the ideas, ideologies and practices that politically mobilised Afghan exiles in West Germany transmitted while moving between Afghanistan and West Germany with different degrees of frequency and intensity over the individual life course. This interaction not only influenced and shaped the life trajectories of the exiles but also transnational patterns of rebellion in the 1970s and the character of transnational links between Afghanistan and West Germany during the Cold War. While these links manifested in one-sided support patterns of West German politics for the more extreme Islamist factions during the proxy war in Afghanistan between 1979 and 1989 (Jahn 2020: 762), they continue to shape the popular worldview towards Afghan history to this date.

With this article, I shed light on the darker side of transnationalism. In the context of violence and war in Afghanistan, I look at Afghan exiles who represented different factions in the war, engaged as menders of and believers in (radical) ideologies as well as peacemakers and supporters of warring factions. The transnational history angle favours a focus on individuals as non-state

actors who constitute/d personal, political and social networks that played a vital part in the politicisation, political mobilisation and subsequent war- and peacemaking dynamics. From the perspective of social constructivism, it is the people themselves who are actors and authors of their life course and history; and from the perspective of transnational history, the 'local or individual' is directly connected to 'the supranational or transcontinental' (Patel 2015). To make sense of transnational flows (Fischer 2018) and understand transnational history-making, it is pertinent to consider the societal contexts, collective processes (Bogner/Rosenthal 2017: 17) and dominant discourses that influence/d individuals during certain periods of their lives. Dausien (2010: 33, as cited in Bogner/Rosenthal 2017: 17) pointed out that a biography, as lived, remembered and (re-)interpreted is always an individual *and* collective product.

Thus, on the one hand, socialisation, habits and dispositions (*habitus*, Bourdieu 1994), as well as external context variables, such as *Zeitgeist* and discourses, influence how individuals 'construct' their lives, e.g., the choices they make at certain junctures. On the other hand, individuals' ideas related to the future, their aspirations, imaginations and hopes (Miyazaki 2004: 10) play a role in such decisions. Yet, individuals are pragmatists and decide to act—engage or withdraw—at any present moment of time as a result of a practical evaluation based on reflection and interpretation of the current constraining or enabling environment versus their own future- and past-related motives for potential action (Emirbayer/Mische 1998, Fischer/van Houte 2020). Thus, human agency can be defined as 'a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualise past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment)' (Emirbayer/Mische 1998: 963). Human agency also entails actors' ability to judge, i.e., to make a choice for action, translate it into a decision and implement it practically in the flow of emergent events within temporal passage (Mead 1932). The moments of reflexivity and interpretation are crucial for 'the capacity of actors to critically shape their own responsiveness to problematic situations' (Emirbayer/Mische 1998: 971), as deliberation, communication and reflexivity enable autonomous choices and control over decision-making to the extent that decisions and their implementation are not entirely determined by structural or other external influences. Conscious choices potentially enable actors 'to pursue their projects in ways that may challenge and transform the situational contexts of action themselves' (Emirbayer/Mische 1998: 994). In this way, human agency carries the potential to be transformative, flexible and inventive (Emirbayer/Mische 1998: 1003, 1009, 1012).

For investigating history-making from below through an analysis of transgressive biographies, it is important to position the interlocutors as authors of their own lives and reflect on the subjectivity of their interpretations. This requires reviewing not only how they acted in certain situations but also following on how they represent, interpret and make sense of their own past and present. The method of choice to trace the relationship of exiles' personal histories with political events and conflict dynamics in Afghanistan, and the trajectory of German policymaking towards Afghanistan, are oral history interviews. They do not require capturing full life courses as in purely biographic research but relating life-course events and engagement with political developments. The methodological challenge that memories and subjective interpretations about the past change over time and are always narrated through the prism of the present is no cause of great concern for this analysis. Because the focus here is indeed on Afghan exiles' subjective experiences and evaluations of their past and present when the interviews took place between 2018 and 2020.

3   Exiles' Engagement for Change in Afghanistan

This section introduces the six interview partners, Afghans in West Germany, whom the author spoke with between 2018 and 2020. In the first part, I will describe their background and how they became stranded in West Germany from the late 1960s onwards. The second part gives a brief overview of the West German context, where they arrived and depicts the essential political dynamics that took place there in the 1960s. The third part analyses the interviewees' experiences of political mobilisation related to the events in Afghanistan from 1978 onwards.

3.1   *Who Were the Interviewees, and How Did They Come to Live in West Germany?*
All interview partners were males well above 50 years old; the youngest arrived in West Germany in late December 1979, aged 16. Three arrived in West Germany to seek protection from turmoil in Kabul between 1979 and 1981, while the other three had lived there already since 1963, 1971 and 1972, respectively. They came as single young men intending to go to university or, as was the case with one respondent, first arrived for a few months to get some practical job experience and 'see the world' before returning shortly after for university studies. One member of the first group had come to West Germany with his wife to pursue a PhD in West Germany in 1968 and returned to Afghanistan to teach at Kabul University in 1976.

From their background, all the selected interviewees were not members of the first-tier Afghan elite who sought refuge in West Germany in great numbers from the late 1970s onwards. They were neither former ministers, or members of the immediate royal family, nor did they become ministers after 2001. However, from their biographical background, all six interview partners hailed from families that had served the constitutional monarchy and partly the Republic, led by former King Zaher Shah's cousin, Mohammed Daud, from 1974 to 1978. Thus, they were brought up in progressive urban families with a modern outlook, however, loyal to the King and the Afghan political setup during what was later called the 'Golden decade' between 1964 and 1974. Moreover, based on a pervasive international orientation among the Kabuli elites of that time, they were educated at one of the international schools in Kabul. One interviewee had travelled extensively with his bureaucrat-father to different duty stations throughout the country during school age. Four were already studying at university in West Germany in the 1960s and 1970s; of the other two, one had just finished, and the other was about to finish education in the Habibia (English-language) and Nejad aka Amani (German-language) high schools in Kabul by the time they arrived in West Germany in 1979, both sent by their parents. While it is evident that the respondents belonged to upper-class families that could afford to migrate to Europe for education purposes and refuge, it did not preclude a certain level of politicisation and rebellion against the father's generation while still in Afghanistan. In West Germany, their political socialisation and self-discovery intensified due to the exposure to the prevailing political climate.

3.2 *The Political and Living Context in West Germany*

West Germany established diplomatic relations with Afghanistan in 1919, which led to close historical ties between both countries leading to a general Germanophile Afghan attitude.[3] Given that Afghans could travel to West Germany without a visa for up to three months, many young men from endowed and educated families travelled overland to West Germany during their holiday or after having finished school for some international exposure and temporary work. This somewhat mirrored the so-called hippie movement of Western young adults towards India and Nepal, that had many crossing through

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3 Encompassing the admiration for German products, quality production standards, but also war strategy and collaboration in the wars, Germany not being a colonial power with respective stakes in Afghanistan, such as Great Britain (legacy of three Anglo-Afghan wars), and the provision of development and technical assistance after World War II.

Afghanistan during the 1960s and 1970s. Bilateral cultural and education relations developed from the 1960s onwards, manifest in several university partnerships between Afghan and German institutions and scholarship programmes, such as by the Hamburg Senate (city of Hamburg). As a rule, Afghans used the contacts of other Afghans to find lodging and summer jobs. The number of Afghans in West Germany during the 1960s and 1970s was marginal and consisted mainly of traders and students. In 1967, 733 Afghans were registered in West Germany. Ten years on, in 1977, the number had risen to 1,765 (cf. German Federal Statistical Office 2019).

In the 1960s, student protests against representatives of former members of the Nazi regime in German public offices and antiquated structures of 'bourgeois German society' prompted political mobilisation at the German universities and epitomised in a subsequent rebellion on the streets of West Germany. International students—among them Afghans—often became politicised, too, and joined student movements or established their own groups, such as the *Ittehad-e Mohaselin Afghanistani* (Afghan Student Union) in 1966. The *Zeitgeist* carried a revolutionary flavour—in West Germany as in Kabul—with diverse groups contending for the proper interpretation of how to seek and achieve a better world. One interview partner reported how he had been exposed to these currents during his studies and 'became Marxist, Leninist, Maoist, but never dogmatic'. While this might suggest inconsequential self-discovery and experimentation in a political maturing process, the interviews showed that politicisation also triggered transnational dynamics. One interviewee shared how he learned about translations of books by Lenin, Mao and Marx into Persian for the first time when he came in contact with Iranians in East Germany. He then contacted a publishing house in Beijing, which sent him 'tons of material in Dari-Persian' by post. He organised the smuggling of the literature to Kabul on two occasions, the first time in 1969.

3.3   *Political Mobilisation of Afghans Related to Afghanistan from 1978 Onwards*

The political agenda of the Marxist government that had overthrown the Republic in the so-called Saur-revolution, a coup d'état in April 1978, ignited resistance throughout Afghanistan because the introduced reforms were perceived to threaten Islamic values and the traditional social order. A second coup d'état by one of the two constituting factions of the Marxist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) was followed by the Soviet intervention in late December 1979, and both amplified the armed opposition. Now leftist and Islamist groups constituted two extremes in a spectrum of opposition forces, with a mix of monarchists and supporters of pro-democratic social

reorganisation in between. Supporters and associates of all these different groups lived in West Germany.

Of the six interview partners, two were involved in leftist circles, one represented the group of liberal and progressive monarchists, two were in the Islamist spectrum, and one worked as embassy secretary of the PDPA in Bonn until 1984. He had previously studied in West Germany, returned to Afghanistan and remigrated, seeking political asylum after the demise of the communist government in 1992 that he had served at different duty stations inside Afghanistan between 1984 and 1992. The biographies of the six Afghans became indirectly entangled and showed overlaps in several coincidences of engagement for change in Afghanistan from 1978 onwards. Thereby they fiercely competed according to their different individual visions and imaginations for the future of Afghanistan in line with their own political orientation and identities as anti-imperialists, peace activists, Islamists, political factionalists, Marxist government loyalists, etc., some of which clashed markedly with their socialisation and family background. Roughly speaking, the leftists and the Islamists antagonised the Kabul regime and its representatives in West Germany. Half of the interview partners were involved in (non-) violent attacks on the Afghan embassy in West Germany's then-capital Bonn in 1979 and 1980. Both political currents encompassed various different groups that made tremendous efforts to mobilise Afghans in West Germany—those who already lived in West Germany, newly arriving refugees—but also the German public and politicians from different parties for their political aims. While the extreme left antagonised the Kabul government and their Soviet backers because of their repressive autocratic rule in the name of the people's democracy, the extreme Islamists had advocated for a social reorganisation of Afghanistan along the model of an Islamic State since the 1960s. They framed the events in Afghanistan, the Marxist government, its supporters and the Soviet intervention as anti-Islamic. Rhetorically as well as practically, the radical Islamists[4] aligned their views with the Western bloc's Cold War interpretation that saw the events

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4 By 1984, Pakistan and the United States had officially acknowledged seven Afghan armed opposition parties to operate from Peshawar in Pakistan. Since three of these considered the return to a monarchy or the integration of ex-King Zaher Shah as a symbolic figure of unity in a future government permissible, they carried the label traditional/ moderate Islamists (Mahaz-e Melli-ye Islami (Gailani), Harakat-e Enqelab-e Islami (Nabi), Jabha-ye Nejat-e Melli (Mojaddedi)). The other four parties were hard-line Islamic fundamentalists who aimed to establish an Islamic State (of Afghanistan) based on a fundamentalist interpretation of Islamic law (*shari'a*). These were Hizb-e Islami of Gulbudin Hekmatyar (HIG), Hizb-e Islami of Yunus Khales (HIK), Ittehad-e Islami (Sayyaf) and Jamiat-e Islami (Rabbani).

in Afghanistan as an attack on the liberal order of the Western hemisphere that thus had to be countered by all possible means, including a proxy war.

This rhetorical tweak and the fact that none of the Western donors were interested in the equally anti-US antagonism of the Islamist factions at that time enabled the Islamists to mobilise support more successfully than all the other groups. The life course experiences of two interview partners affiliated with the Islamist political spectrum point to a broad repertoire of activities they employed to gain support. The opening of official representations of the different armed opposition factions in Bonn had the most impact. The representatives entertained close relations with the German parties and their deputies in the German parliament. Whenever a commander or Islamist leader from any of the Afghan armed factions (so-called *mujahedin*) came to visit West Germany, these representatives ensured the official protocol, including high-ranking meetings of Islamist leaders and commanders with German politicians, media, political foundations, but also corporate actors and charities. One respondent mentioned, not without pride, that he had been able to arrange ad hoc meetings with high-level politicians in the chancellery of West Germany with just a phone call. Afghans affiliated with the Islamist spectrum established charity organisations that aided factions of armed Islamists, albeit the official labelling designated the collaboration as 'humanitarian' or 'refugee aid'.

The repertoire of activities included equipping so-called freedom fighters with photo and TV cameras to collect footage from battlefields inside Afghanistan. One interview partner reported about his organisation's activities, which entailed training by a German public broadcaster in camera work for *mujahedin* fighters from Afghanistan to provide the broadcaster with 'propaganda' material. However, the second interviewee with an Islamist background—who was working on the Afghan political front in West Germany with frequent travel to Pakistan and Afghanistan accompanying German journalists and, in a few cases, members of parliament—stated how he recorded staged videos for the same purpose himself. These translated into a steady flow of donations from the German public. The repertoire also included medical aid for injured *mujahedin* fighters and children, with German doctors travelling to Peshawar and sponsorship to fly patients for surgery and treatment to West Germany. In several cases, hospitals and doctors, together with charities, covered the costs jointly. With increasing public relations impact, several of these Afghanistan aid organisations achieved major political buy-in and a surge in public credibility, as members of all parties in the German parliament not only joined the boards of such donor charities but also repeatedly appeared in fundraising campaigns throughout the country.

However, aid organisations and committees of the left spectrum of Afghan organisations in West Germany were engaged in similar activities. In addition, they mobilised prominent artists to join their cause. For example, Peter Maffay—a popular German singer—agreed to travel to the Afghan border area in Pakistan and meet *mujahedin* and charity organisations in the refugee camps. According to the interview partner who organised his trip, this journey and its coverage were much more important to raise awareness among the German public for the plight of Afghans than Maffay donating the profit from several of his German concerts. Splintered among themselves and—in contrast to the various Islamist groups—with no fighting factions in the war but few like-minded small-sized groups operating within Afghanistan, the Afghan leftists in West Germany focused on public protests and awareness-raising with the German public. They directed their activities against the Islamists—warning at an early stage about a re-Islamisation of Afghan politics—and the Soviet and Kabul governments. For example, during the state visit of Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev in West Germany, one interview partner organised a hunger strike of Afghan women in a Russian orthodox church in one of West Germany's cities. Often, the activities of the leftist groups, among whom were many student associations, experienced less political support, e.g., when they registered a protest march with the city authorities in Bonn, they were assigned the more remote square for their meeting, whereas the Islamist groups obtained permission to gather at a central location. At the anniversaries of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, both camps started their protest marches to the Soviet embassy on 27th December because they could not agree on organising it jointly. However, in front of the embassy, both rallies met, and the supporters listened to each other's speeches etc., as their protest addressed a common enemy.

The third interest group of Afghans in exile, self-designated 'liberal and progressive monarchists', navigated the political marketplace of Bonn at a different level. The interview partner representing this group was part of a circle dominated by former bureaucrats around a former minister and envoy, Dr. Yusuf, who also lived in West Germany. The interview partner expressed that he had previously not been political and did not believe he should involve himself in any peace or mediation initiative. However, after meeting Dr. Yusuf in West Germany, he could not evade involvement and deny political activism due to their personal relationship. He joined Yusuf's group that had been established by the name OSULA (Organization for Strengthening of Unity and Struggle for the Liberation of Afghanistan) in Switzerland in 1980/81 with the main aim of ending the conflict in Afghanistan through mediation between all involved parties. The interviewee spoke of several initiatives that had been started throughout the 1980s to create unity among the armed factions and, most spectacularly in April

1992, the attempt to save the reconciliation-willing government of Najibullah; however, in vain. The lobbying position of the group around Dr Yusuf in the Bonn political arena was favourable because he was known to be close to the former King Zaher Shah, who had lived in exile in Rome since 1974. Many people concerned with the conflict in Afghanistan thought the King could return and re-establish a peaceful government after communist rule or serve as the integrative figure at least. Most everyday activities in the office run by five members of OSULA in Bonn remained thus closely linked to interviews and public appearances of the King in Italy.

4   Three Types of Transgressive Life Courses

While the previous section focused on the time of the interviewees' lives when their engagement for change in Afghanistan peaked, this section is about the interview partners' subjective, later evaluation of their activities. This biographic perspective qualifies the significance of early activism in the framework of the full-scale life courses.

I have demonstrated that all six interview partners engaged differently with events in Afghanistan. Their past—including resources such as social capital, educational background, family socialisation, the feeling of obligation to engage—and their future aspirations for change in Afghanistan, resulting in a rebellion against the fathers' generation and politicisation at one point in time, either still in Afghanistan or West Germany, all played a role in their engagement at certain junctures based on the political links, networks and resources they were able to mobilise privately and in the German political and public landscape. Remarkably, at least for some time, each of the interview partners' engagement was solely based on conviction. They, therefore, invested their own resources, money and life chances in the hope for change in Afghanistan, each according to their respectively imagined political future for the country. The decision to do so and the evaluation of it in hindsight had severe repercussions in material and psychological terms for the interviewees' later lives and résumés. Presenting interviewees' self-evaluation regarding biographical ruptures shall aid our understanding of the transgressive element in their biographies.

My analysis points to three types of transgressive life courses, which I will call hereon quietists, skilled survivors and masters of crossover. Since these represent 'ideal' types, the individual empirical cases are located on a spectrum along and in between. The quietist category captures those exile activists who have fully withdrawn from any active engagement for change due to feelings of

disappointment and failure. One interview partner spoke of naivety that had characterised many of the peacemaking initiatives started by Afghans from the 1980s onwards. He emphasised the perceived power of structural forces during the Cold War and how initiatives from engaged individuals from below resembled a tilting at windmills that never had a chance of success from the outset in a larger political setup. With an undertone of fatalism and resignation, he summarised: 'We wanted peace, but the world wanted war in Afghanistan'. From the late 1990s onwards, he never engaged in any high-profile activism again and completely focussed on his professional career in West Germany, working as an independent consultant until retirement. Another interviewee, who was very active among leftists in the 1980s, has also largely withdrawn from all practical engagement, however later. After he had tried to lobby and mobilise at the academic and political level for peace in Afghanistan well into the 2010s, he felt frustrated and disappointed in German politics because his ideas were not heard and remained unrecognised.

In contrast, those individuals attributed to the category of skilled survivors have in some form remained practically engaged related to Afghanistan; yet, they put their previous or initial engagement behind them and described their current involvement as purely 'unpolitical'. The subsequent lesser intensity of engagement can be attributed to the de facto loss of energy, material resources and political capital that shaped their political engagement during the Cold War up to some point in the 1990s. The DVPA member, who had been politically active in West Germany as a student and served as embassy secretary until 1984 before serving the communist government in Kabul, sought asylum in Germany in 1993 and has not worked in a profession despite several retraining measures since. He resigned himself to being a taxi driver until reaching pension age. Nevertheless, despite stating that he no longer has the strength to be politically active in any party, he remained engaged socially and culturally among the Afghans in his hometown in Germany and was part of the assistance network there when Afghan refugees arrived in high numbers in 2015/16.

In contrast to the withdrawn quietist, he harbours no regret and accepts that his shared vision of society failed. However, he remains firmly convinced that the cause for his engagement was right. Alluding to the pervasive corruption of later regimes, he emphasised: 'There was no single so-called communist that became rich; we were patriots and did what we felt was necessary'. Thus, a mood of defiance predominates his subjective review in hindsight. Another interview partner can be situated in-between the skilled survivor and crossover categories because he still engaged as the head of an association that runs a humanitarian organisation and projects in Afghanistan following his previous engagement in Pakistan during the 1980s. His past engagement covered a broad

spectrum of activities, including violent and non-violent attacks against symbolic institutions of the Kabul and Soviet regimes. While he does not glorify these radical acts and concedes that they were not necessary (and the violent attack possibly even a mistake), he is nevertheless proud to have outwitted the authorities time and again during his activist life and subverted rules to advocate and put into practice what he felt was in his purview, to strive for change in Afghanistan. While he has lived and financed his early activities for change in Afghanistan from a row of subsequent undertakings in the event industry and gastronomy since the 1970s, he also built up an organisation that aided Afghan refugees in Pakistan in the 1990s and has focussed on different humanitarian activities in Afghanistan since 2001. The shift from radically politicised and partly violent activities to humanitarian and largely 'non-political' engagement adds a crossover characteristic to his skilful ways of surviving with and despite deep immersion in the Afghan conflict from exile.

Insights from two other interview partners justify a similar categorisation of these respondents as masters of crossover. Due to their profile as intermediaries between Peshawar-based Islamist armed opposition groups and German politicians, parties, media and political foundations, the ability to cross the worlds between fundamentalist parties' realities and needs and rationales of German party politics and foreign policy in the Cold War setting was the very precondition for their engagement. One interview partner ran a prominent aid organisation, the other a subsection of a representation of one of the fundamentalist parties. Both facilitated visits of Afghan armed opposition leaders and commanders to West Germany and opened channels to German politics, its public and media outlets. One of their remarkable feats for representatives of the Afghan armed opposition groups in West Germany was the organisation of a public hearing on 'Six years war and occupation in Afghanistan' in the German parliament on 18 and 19 March 1986. One of the interview partners hosted the leader of the Jabha-ye Nejat-e Melli (National Liberation Front of Afghanistan), Sibghatullah Mojaddedi, who spoke as one of two *mujahedin* leaders from Afghanistan at the event. Furthermore, an Afghan doctor, the interlocutor's organisational counterpart in Pakistan, spoke as an expert at the hearing. Other transnational activities included the facilitation of journalists' and politicians' travel to Peshawar and across the border into Afghanistan, the organisation of wounded fighters' transfers to West Germany, and the (hidden) support of Afghan armed opposition forces through refugee aid in the Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan. As a rule, these were administrated by the armed opposition groups based in Peshawar. Both interviewees describe their engagement as needed; they felt obligated to engage based on their personal beliefs and political orientation. After the onset of the civil war in 1992, their convic-

tions were shaken following the destructive behaviour of those whom they had supported with all their energy and means.

However, while one stayed on and grappled with declining financial support for 'humanitarian' projects, first in Pakistan, then Afghanistan, where he is still active besides also running projects with Afghan refugees in West Germany, the other struggled over the meaning of political Islam and reform options within Islam after ceding his previous party commitment and starting legal studies at a German university. The crossover-humanitarian did articulate some degree of disappointment because the public recognition he had enjoyed for years has gone down—evident in the decline of the Bonn mayor's office to organise the 40th anniversary celebration of his organisation in the town hall. The political Islamist-turned-lawyer built a career with his law firm subscribing to the ethos of—if necessary political—struggle based on legal regulations. Many of his clients are Afghans and other internationals, as he has been increasingly engaged in asylum law cases from 2015 onwards, besides also representing victims of the German military intervention in Afghanistan. In his own reflection, the legal representation of Afghan countrymen in German courts is not only close to his heart but a meaningful way to maintain, mend and constantly re-establish transnational ties and connections with his origin country from a critical responsibility stance. For him, this provides a frame of continuity from where he started with his ambitions for change in Afghanistan to his current engagement as an advocate of ordinary people, including Afghans in Germany and Afghanistan. His personal understanding of justice shaped his activities then and has done so until today. The master-of-crossover quality of his engagement is tangible in his own evaluation, according to which he found an equally meaningful and substitute field of engagement still related to his origin country.

To sum up, I have demonstrated how the interview partners preserved the transnational dimension differently over their respective life courses. While all engaged transnationally with a vision for change in Afghanistan and sacrificed substantial shares of their lifetime, energy, social and material means to realise their respective vision, the personal assessments diverge. The quietist interpretation emphasises failure, resignation and regret, whereas the skilled survivors assert defiance without regret with sustained part-time 'non-political' engagement for Afghan causes either in Germany or Afghanistan. The masters of crossover continue to lead professional lives in which interaction with Afghan counterparts is significant, and they evaluate this as meaningful even though completely altered compared to the 1980s. Crossover personalities experienced loss—e.g., of trust and faith in their previous affiliations—and ruptures but found new meaning in a related field where they can potentially still exhibit societal influence.

5   Conclusion: The Heuristic Value of a Transnational History Approach

In this article, I have shown how transnational dynamics of exchange between Afghanistan and West Germany in the 1980s were rooted in the activities of Afghan exiles. They occupied the interface between political factions inside Afghanistan or in Pakistani exile and West German politicians, policymaking circles and the wider public. The excerpts from individual life courses indicate that individuals were highly influential in contributing to and shaping transnational history. Afghans in West Germany served as carriers of visions and ideologies, as instigators of peace initiatives and as resource persons for Afghans who stayed behind and were actively involved or immediately affected by the war and German politics and society. The six interlocutors committed themselves to interpreting the Afghan conflict for a German audience by organising information events about Afghanistan, issuing publications (journals and other materials) and protests—each according to their own worldview, vision and future aspiration connected to their home country. The Cold War context and block polarity conditioned that German politics and the media were much more receptive to one interpretation—that of the Islamists—than to alternatives. It is for this bias that transnational history-making as the process-view on Afghan exiles' activities described above generated a legacy of 'Western propaganda that framed the *mujahidin* as freedom fighters and their *jihad* as "resistance"' (Green 2017: 26), which deeply penetrated not only public perception but also academia and policy narratives.

This legacy continues to shape the popular understanding of Afghan history to this date. It is framed in state-to-state strategies and usually uni-directional as the Western view towards the Afghanistan conflict. In contrast, the bi-directional dimension that shapes transnational history has not been acknowledged, possibly because its legacy sheds light on the dark side of international relations. The active support of 'freedom fighters' whose Islamist worldview was ignored, and of their *jihad* in the course of which fundamentalist religious radicalisation became widespread and provided a basis for the transformation of the religious landscape in Afghanistan and Pakistan, is seldom linked to Western or German Cold War policies towards Afghanistan. The common bias of researchers to focus on the bright side and 'beneficial' or positive aspects of transnational histories has marginalised 'the suppression and subsiding, the diversion and destruction, the forgetting and fading of transnational relations' (Patel 2015). Such inattentiveness became tangible after the apparent shift in West Germany's policies towards Afghanistan after the end of the Cold War because the war in Afghanistan was simply no longer of interest after a decade

of politicisation through the media, party politics and the political instrumentalisation of the aid sector. Thus, this article's main contribution is to illuminate some initial corners of the dark side of transnationalism during the Afghan proxy war in the 1980s.

The six interview partners shaped transnational dynamics because they were either physically and/ or cognitively mobile. While moving between Afghanistan and West Germany with different degrees of frequency and intensity over the individual life course, they were able to challenge conventional norms of diplomacy and agenda-setting as they constituted the liaison between armed opposition factions and the outside world of potential support. As such, they played a pivotal role in the armed factions' diplomatic relations with West Germany. Even where interview partners were not immediately implicated in facilitating the travel of German opinion makers like journalists and politicians to the frontline and refugee camps along the Afghan–Pakistan border, they engaged in information campaigning, public protests and hosting activities for likeminded Afghans who visited West Germany to mobilise aid and political support. The links and support infrastructure are evidence of a strong influence on German public opinion and policymaking regarding the Afghan conflict in the 1980s.

Epistemologically, the article breaks new ground in adopting an actor-centric transnational history approach based on biographic research and the assumption that individual life courses and historical processes co-constitute each other. I demonstrated how the life courses of all interlocutors were characterised by ruptures that led to differing perceptions regarding failure, loss and regret and subsequent changes in engagement for Afghan causes. Given that biographies always constitute an individual *and* collective product, the analysis of the interlocutors' transgressive biographies highlighted that those who have proven to be masters of crossover in their transnational entanglements display a high degree of agency which is transformative, flexible and inventive. By presenting six transgressive biographies that covered three political orientations in Afghanistan before and during the 1980s, the article contributes to a better understanding of the complexity and multi-layeredness of transnationally entangled history. Furthermore, the findings represent a unique puzzle piece in the strand of research that increasingly qualifies the prevalent Eurocentric view of history and points to the need to account for the transnational dimensions of non-state actors' diplomacy *versus* German politics and society. Such scholarship is currently nascent for Afghan–Western relations during the Cold War. I have shown how the life course lens enables us to see—and international relations or history potentially to acknowledge—the influence of agency, discourses and ideas that operate between polities and societies and are evident

in transnational history-making from below. Uncovering some of the darker aspects of transnationally entangled histories will allow drawing lessons from the past for contemporary and future transnational relations. Therefore, such empirical-based scholarship should be taken further to involve a wider diversity of actors and be reflected upon against sources in private and political archives.

Acknowledgments

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