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The Afghanistan Digital Library Project

By [The Afghanistan Digital Library Editorial Team](#)

Although Afghanistan's cultural heritage--monuments, art, and books--has suffered much damage and loss, particularly in the 1990s, much has remained protected in private and public collections outside the country. NYU's Afghanistan Digital Library Project seeks to provide digital access to the country's written heritage, in particular to books published in Afghanistan.

The total number of books published in Afghanistan is comparatively modest. The printing press came late to Afghanistan: lithography first and then, in the second decade of the 20th century, typography. The country's only printing house was a government enterprise that was fairly limited in its output. According to the best available information (Wasil Noor, 1980), the first book printed in Afghanistan was an anti-Wahhabi tract published in 1871. Between 1871 and 1978, Noor lists 1,343 titles. Another source that adds some corroboration to this number lists 400 books published between 1951 and 1965.

When the Mujahideen government was established in April 1992, Afghanistan's most significant library collection, the Kabul Public Library, was one of the first victims of its cultural paranoia. The Northern Alliance forces of Ahmad Shah Mas'ud and Burhan al-Din Rabbani burned tens of thousands of books in both the Kabul Public Library and the Kabul University Library. When the Taliban drove out the Northern Alliance in September 1996, they too turned on libraries and other cultural institutions. The Kabul Museum, for example, was badly looted during the Mujahideen period and then systematically destroyed by the Taliban. At the Public Library, the Taliban destroyed every book they deemed "un-Islamic," which meant books in foreign languages and any books with pictures. Because Afghan books were, for the most part, published with the King's picture as frontispiece, the Taliban did their best to erase, at least from the libraries, Afghanistan's own publishing history. During the Taliban period, a rocket struck the building, a library worker was killed, and the resulting fire destroyed many more books.

Since the fall of the Taliban and the installation of the interim government in Afghanistan, the NYU Libraries, in conjunction with NYU's Department of Middle Eastern Studies, the Center for Near Eastern Studies, and the Center for International Cooperation, has begun development of the Afghanistan Digital Library in aid of the reconstruction effort now underway in that country. The aim is not simply to restore the availability of books that may have been destroyed or dispersed from libraries in Afghanistan in the course of twenty-five years of civil war. Copies of Afghan publications predating 1930 are extremely rare, and the project will also make hitherto inaccessible materials universally available in electronic form to anyone with a serious interest in the country's history and culture and with access to a computer.

In the pilot phase of the project, as many of the forty-three books known to have been published between 1871 and

1900 as can be located will be digitized, cataloged and uploaded to a website (<http://dlib.nyu.edu/divlib/bobst/adl/>). The books will be downloadable and therefore freely available to researchers throughout the world. Subscribers to an e-mail list will be notified as new materials become available (visit the above website for subscription information as it becomes available).

The eventual aim of the project, should the pilot program prove successful, is to digitize, catalog, and make available in electronic form (website and CD-ROM) Dari (Persian) and Pashto books published in Afghanistan between 1871 and 1930. In time, the project may also include historic photographs, government documents, journals and newspapers, and manuscript works. Editorial direction of the Afghanistan Digital Library Project rests with Professor Robert D. McChesney of NYU's Department of Middle Eastern Studies. Library coordination is managed by Dr. Michael Stoller, Director of Collections and Research Services. The Project draws upon the resources of the Libraries' Preservation, Digital Library and Cataloguing Departments. For more information about the project, see <http://dlib.nyu.edu/divlib/bobst/adl/>.

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