

Book Reviews

RECENT WORKS ON AFGHANISTAN

Afghantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-89

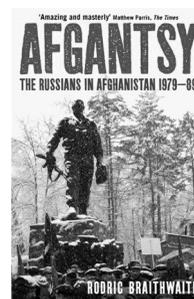
By Rodric Braithwaite

Reviewed by Ali A. Jalali, Distinguished Professor at the Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies, National Defense University, former Interior Minister of Afghanistan and author of several books on Afghan military history

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the decade-long military operation of the Russian forces in the remote Central Asian country has been the subject of numerous studies focused on how the Soviet Army fought and lost the asymmetric war against the Western-backed Afghan Mujahedin guerrillas. The US-led military intervention in Afghanistan, in the wake of the 9/11 al Qaeda-linked terrorist attacks in the United States from bases in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, has spurred renewed interest in studying the military history of the turbulent land, particularly the Soviet war against the Afghan resistance in the 1980s.

Rodric Braithwaite's *Afghantsy: the Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-89* is one of the latest books on the subject and the most comprehensive story of the Soviet experience in Afghanistan. The author uses a variety of primary sources, which are all listed with full citations in the order of presentation at the end of the volume. As it is based almost exclusively on Russian sources, it is, in fact, the Russian perspective of the drawn-out conflict. From the Soviets' "road to Kabul" to their entanglement in the "disasters of war" and eventually to "the long goodbye," Braithwaite walks the reader through the minutiae of the Soviet soldiers' saga, for the most part in their own words. It is a story of how the Soviet leadership, its military, and individual servicemen behaved in the face of a difficult situation. Further, the tome exemplifies the effect of the brutal war on Soviet soldiers, their families, and the Russian public at large.

The author shares the common assertion of Soviet military historians that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was defensive in nature and aimed at ending a "chaotic situation" in the Soviet Union's immediate neighborhood. However, the author acknowledges the invasion came against a backdrop of a long history of Russian interests in Afghanistan. "It took the Russians two hundred and fifty years to go to Kabul," he writes. The ambition to expand southward in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and efforts to secure its frontiers against "undesirable neighbors" and protect the pacified areas from lawless tribes beyond them have long been the hallmark of Russian strategy in the greater Central Asia and Afghanistan. Afghanistan was the ultimate prize of the Great Game that the Russian and British empires played in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and served as a peaceful battleground for the East-West ideological battle during the Cold War. The author takes note of a number of previous irritations in Russo-Afghan relations following the Russian conquest of Central Asia: Russian troops' encroachment on the Afghan territory in 1885 and capture of Panjdeh—a border town between Herat and Marv; the Red Army's furious pursuit of Central Asian rebels across the Afghan border in the 1920s; and Stalin's military



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intervention in northern Afghanistan in 1929 to support the beleaguered Afghan King Amanullah.

The bloody Communist coup of 27 April 1978, was led by the Moscow-backed People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), overthrew the Daud regime, and opened the way for wider involvement of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. But, as General Lyakhovski, a Soviet chronicler of the war and an Afghan war veteran, was quoted as saying: the April coup was the beginning of "tragedy not only for Afghanistan but for the Soviet Union as well." Although Braithwaite does not see reliable evidence that the Russians were behind the coup, the PDPA leaders were closely linked to the Soviet Committee for State Security (KGB) since the early 1950s and were under Soviet control. Whatever role the Soviet Union did or did not play in staging the coup, the Communist takeover was not the immediate reason to put in motion the forthcoming Soviet invasion of the country. The actual milestone of the intervention came in March 1979 with the explosion of violence in Herat. The anti-Soviet uprising took a heavy toll on Soviet citizens and thousands of Afghans who died in the rebellion and its aftermath.

The author offers a compelling analysis that although the Afghan government was able to put down the Herat uprising, "a slow burning fuse had been lit," leading to the invasion nine months later. Following the Herat disturbance, the Soviet leaders rejected the Afghan government's persistent requests for the deployment of Soviet troops to counter rising insurgency. During the next several months, unrest and armed resistance continued to spread throughout the country. The author particularly highlights the infighting within the PDPA which grew increasingly bloody until it culminated in September with PDPA General Secretary Nur Mohammad Taraki's murder by Prime Minister Hafizullah Amin. As Braithwaite writes, the murder of Taraki, a Brezhnev favorite, was the last straw and led to the mood in Moscow shifting in favor of military intervention to depose Amin and install a more reliable Afghan leader. The choice was Barak Karmal, the leader of the Parcham dissident faction within the PDPA who was living in exile in Eastern Europe. Meanwhile, Soviet military preparation for contingencies started as early as April 1979 with several special purpose units deployed to Afghanistan between April and September.

In pursuance of the Soviet General Staff classification, the author divides the conduct of the Soviet war into four phases: the invasion (December 1979-February 1980), military operations to pacify the country (March 1980-April 1985), *Afghanization* of the war (April 1985-end of 1986), and the withdrawal (November 1986-February 1989). The nature of combat action, structure of forces, command and control issues, and level of cooperation with Afghan government forces are outlined in each phase. The study is rich with the personal experiences of the Soviet fighters and brief on actual military operations, which are mostly anecdotal. It reviews only two large-scale operations in detail: the Panjsher Operation in 1984 and Zhawar/Magestral Operation in 1985-86 in Paktia-Khost provinces.

Braithwaite's chapter on "Nation Builders" is the most unconvincing part of the book. In line with official Soviet assertions, the author gives the impression the occupiers were involved in nation-building projects even while the war against the Afghan resistance was ongoing.

However, the amount of Soviet building effort pales in comparison with the destruction caused by the occupation. This period would be better described as nation spoiling than nation building. High on the delusion of revolutionary makeover of a traditional society, the “nation-building” project was ideologically driven and, as the author agrees, was an “ultimately futile attempt to build socialism.” The Soviets and their Afghan allies were so out of touch with the realities of Afghan society that President Taraki told a visiting Soviet official in July 1978 to “come back in a year, by which time the mosques would be empty.” What actually happened was the opposite—protesting attempts to impose alien values on them, most Afghans moved closer to their Islamic faith—a shift eventually exploited by religious extremists to influence the political scene. The occupiers were determined to destroy the socio-political system the resistance was tried to preserve.

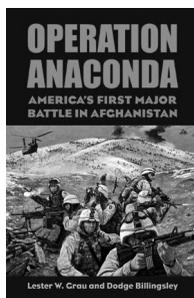
The author provides many examples of the brutality of Soviet soldiers who deliberately killed members of the civilian population. Yet the author sounds apologetic by asserting that civilian casualties during the civil war of the 1990s and the American-backed campaign to expel the Taliban in 2001, “equaled, if not exceeded, the horrors that occurred between 1979 and 1989.” On the contrary, during the civil war the number of civilians killed was estimated in tens of thousands, while conservative estimates by the United Nations and Amnesty International of Afghan deaths during the Soviet war are over one million. The Soviets never attempted counterinsurgency but made efforts to destroy the rural areas to deny sanctuaries to the resistance and force the population to move to major cities for easier control or to drive them into exile. Twenty percent of the Afghan population (more than five million people) was driven into exile in Pakistan and Iran during the Soviet conflict.

Since the study draws heavily on Russian sources and narratives, it emphasizes the Soviet experience of the war, thus limiting the Afghan perspective and misrepresenting certain realities. The book offers the most comprehensive and useful details of how the Soviet Union became entangled in the Afghan imbroglio, why it decided to invade, how it fought the Afghan resistance, and how and when it made the decision under Gorbachev’s leadership in 1986 to leave. However, when the study does reference the Afghan narrative, it often makes ill-founded assertions based on historical inaccuracies. The references on the Afghan Mujahedin forces are the most disappointing part of the book. They are impaired by unrealistic assessment.

The author’s dash through Afghan history and culture is also replete with factual errors and problematic interpretations about the political system of Afghanistan and its ethnic issues. One of the most serious mistakes is to list the Taraki-Amin crackdown on the Karmal-led Parcham faction as having occurred in 1979; it actually took place a year earlier in the summer of 1978. Barak Karmal was not a Pashtun. Anahita Ratebzad was not the first Afghan woman appointed to a senior political position under the Communists as the author asserts; there were many women serving as cabinet ministers, parliament members and other senior officials in the 1960s and 1970s before the Communist takeover. Tashkent is in Uzbekistan, not Turkmenistan; Yakub, the head of the Afghan Army under Amin was not Amin’s son-in-law nor was Ahmad Akbar, the security chief, his cousin; and the 40th Army was

under the Turkistan Military District, not the Turkmenistan Military District. Shaving the heads of Afghan recruits is not against the Afghan culture. The 21 February 1979, demonstration in Kabul was a spontaneous public uprising, not an event staged by an American Central Intelligence Agency agent. There has never been an Anglican Church in Afghanistan near the Pakistani border. Soviet prisoners were never incarcerated in the Afghan Pul-e Charkhi Prison. The author's acceptance of the Soviets' claims that despite the brutalities they committed the Soviet soldiers "got on with the Afghan population rather well—better than the NATO soldiers who succeeded them" is incongruous. Finally, throughout the book Afghan geographic names are inaccurately transliterated from Russian into English. "Punjsher," a well-known location has been distortedly spelled as "Pandsher."

Despite the various inaccuracies, *Afghantys: the Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-89* has its own merits and is the best available source for a comprehensive account of the Soviet experience in Afghanistan. No doubt the study dispels many myths of the Cold War and clarifies many unanswered questions about the Soviet military occupation of Afghanistan during the 1980s. However, because of its exclusive focus on the Soviet side of the story, it does spawn many misrepresentations about the realities of the Afghan battleground where the Soviet-Mujahedin struggle was played out. For a more balanced view, this book should be read along with other studies such as Peter Tomsen's *The Wars of Afghanistan: Messianic Terrorism, Tribal Conflicts, and the Failures of Great Powers*.



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Operation Anaconda: America's First Major Battle in Afghanistan

by Lester W. Grau and Dodge Billingsley

Reviewed by Colonel Robert M. Cassidy, US Army, a military professor at the US Naval War College, served as a special assistant to the operational commander in Afghanistan in 2010-11

Les Grau and Dodge Billingsley offer keen insight in their historical account of Operation Anaconda. Both authors are eminently qualified to write such a book. Les Grau is an Afghanistan expert and has written prolifically about the Soviet-Afghan War. Dodge Billingsley is a daring combat journalist who covered the first Russian-Chechen War of 1994-96 and was on the ground in the Shar-i Kot Valley during Operation Anaconda. This book focuses on the tactical level, much like Grau's earlier work *The Bear Went over the Mountain*. This poorly planned and executed operation shines a light on the conspicuously regrettable arrogance and ignorance engendered in the Pentagon and US Central Command during the first years of the Afghan War. The detailed anatomy of the March 2002 debacle in the Shar-i Kot Valley is an enduring testimony to strategic failure of significant magnitude mainly because various officials and planners in the Pentagon did not comprehend or plan for any long-term outcome in Afghanistan or Pakistan. To be certain, in the 2001-02 period, US military thinking, doctrine, and organization were focused almost exclusively on potential adversaries. Ultimately, this book recalls the fundamental risks in engaging in wars without fully understanding