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Vladislav Tamarov. *Afghanistan: Soviet Vietnam.* San Francisco, Calif.: Mercury House, 1992. 183 pp. $18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-56279-021-9.

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Vladislav Tamarov's *Afghanistan: Soviet Vietnam* was one of the most engaging books I read in 1994. This first-hand account of the experiences of a Soviet soldier in Afghanistan is unique, disturbing, and thought-provoking. I sincerely doubt that any reader will be unaffected by it.

While the personal perspective at times allows for odd interpretations (for example, the author seems to believe that the war was fought to maintain drug traffic), the book repeatedly drives home the foolishness and inhumanity of the Afghan campaign. The political leadership, Tamarov claims, "told us that Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan were planting trees and building schools and hospitals." Instead, "We came to a place that we didn't know for a reason that we didn't understand."

Tamarov has even more contempt for the army high command, whom he derides as "old children playing toy soldier." His description of training would be comical were it not so tragic. He was trained to parachute. When he went to Afghanistan, he was forced to become a minesweeper, for which he had not been trained. "Why did they train us to jump with a parachute when no one used parachutes in Afghanistan?" he asks. One has to wonder. Thanks to a caring commander, who not only provided useful lessons to his apprentice minesweeper, but also seemed to have a sixth sense that warned of imminent danger, Tamarov made it out alive. Aside from that individual, his description of the Soviet military heirarchy defines incompetence.

Tamarov's attitude toward the Afghans is an interesting combination of hatred and respect. He reserves most of his contempt for Afghan government forces, who often sold their weapons to the mujahideen, "creating a meat grinder, in which our own weapons fired at us." Some of the mujahideen, he claimed, were simply bandits fighting to make money or secure territory. They often butchered prisoners in hideous fashion. Only Soviet journalists, Tamarov claims, ever wrote about these "mujahideen."

On the other hand, Tamarov has a grudging admiration for Afghans who took to the mountains to defend their homeland. If someone had invaded Russia, he notes, the Russian people would defend their own land as their predecessors did against Napoleon and Hitler. Aliens who come into Afghanistan will always face a similar fate, be they "Soviet, American or Martian." The Soviet press, Tamarov notes, diligently ignored this parallel.

Vietnam parallels are abundant. Tamarov claims not to remember anyone who did not at least try drugs. "Most of us smoked only when we felt really bad about something – usually everything." Upon his return, he suffered from "Afghan nightmares," and while awake he on occasion seemed to phase in and out of reality. At times his problems were slightly comical, for example when he dove under some bushes after a truck had a flat. Far more often he evokes sympathy for the Afghantsi. Tamarov couldn't keep a job, got divorced, took to the bottle, and became distanced from his parents. (He did come to understand why grandpa, who fought in World War Two, never liked watching war movies.) His conclusion, that the war produced only "thousands of mothers who lost sons, thousands of cripples, thousands of torn-up lives," could easily conclude a Vietnam piece.

Tamarov also notes one disturbing difference between the two wars. "In the United States, there are 186 psychological rehabilitation centers to help Vietnam veterans. The USSR has not even one." Americans, he claims "didn't just write dissertations on post-traumatic stress syndrome … they treated people for it, too."

The writing and translating are excellent throughout this work. The descriptions are vivid and the prose flows along nicely. An occasional humorous anecdote or witty phrase will often prompt a smile. The dozens of accompanying photographs, however, are what make this book truly exceptional. One of the most poignant is of an enormous column built by Alexander, "the same Alexander the Great who said 'one can occupy Afghanistan, but one cannot vanquish her'." Others display the beauty of the

Afghan landscape, or the sheer brutality of war. The most haunting are those of his comrades (who are among the youngest-looking soldiers I've ever seen). A series of pictures are often accompanied by a brief caption in the vein: "This is so-and-so. He was my friend. He died 12 hours later when he stepped on a mine."

Through often disturbing, the book is strangely uplifting as well. Despite his travails, Tamarov manages to maintain an air of dignity and humanity about himself (as well as his love of animals, notably his fat orange cat). He does not categorize or judge except on an individual basis. War, he says, doesn't make a creep into a better person. The implication is that the good need not be destroyed by its horrors.

The book concludes with Tamarov meeting some American veterans of Vietnam. Though none spoke Russian, and few of the Russians spoke English, "we knew we had found friends ... blood brothers ... [who] understood us a lot better than our own people did." Read this book and you will gain a better understanding of the Afghantsi. You will likely emerge with some degree of sympathy for the Soviet rank-and-file who fought it the war, something that one rarely gets from more analytical histories.

I recommend this book highly. At less than two hundred pages, with plenty of photos and wide margins, it can be read easily in a few hours. For those of you who are instructors, you may well wish to consider adopting this for your classes, for it is both an easy read and certain to provoke discussion.

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