

# H-Diplo

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**Artemy Kalinovsky. "Decision Making and the Soviet War in Afghanistan: From Intervention to Withdrawal."** *Journal of Cold War Studies* 11:4 (Fall 2009): 46-73. DOI: 10.1162/jcws.2009.11.4.46. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/jcws.2009.11.4.46> .

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Review by **David Gibbs**, University of Arizona

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Overall, this is an important article that adds significantly to our knowledge of the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. The main theme of this article is the overall significance of Afghanistan for maintaining Soviet prestige and "credibility," and how this basic motive influenced Soviet decision-makers throughout the 1979-89 period. The credibility issue emerges as a basic threat that runs through the whole nine-year war. During the Leonid Brezhnev era, the Soviets opted for an invasion (despite reservations) for fear that their worldwide credibility was at stake, and would be tarnished if they projected an image of weaknesses. Several years later, Mikhail Gorbachev concluded that the invasion was a disaster, a "bleeding wound," but he could not withdraw quickly, lest this raise questions about Soviet power and resolve. For all the differences of policy and style from Brezhnev to Gorbachev, there remained a basic consistency of policy, on the need to maintain the USSR's credibility as a superpower. At the same time, Kalinovsky's study reveals considerable inter-bureaucratic rivalry and feuding, which complicated Soviet policy and may have prolonged the occupation.

And Kalinovsky reflects briefly on the significance of the Soviet experience in Afghanistan for contemporary international politics: he is surely correct that the dilemmas faced by Soviet decision makers have considerable relevance for the current U.S. counter-insurgency campaign, which once again faces the problem of an intractable war, combined with the danger of reduced credibility if it withdraws too quickly. The comparison seems especially relevant at this time, as the American war in Afghanistan has gone on for almost as long a period as the Soviet war.

This study does not produce any huge surprises, and the main points it raises have been well established by several previous studies. However, Kalinovsky documents his claims with impressive thoroughness; and, on important points of detail, he adds to our base of

knowledge. For example, he convincingly shows that even after the December 1979 invasion, the Soviet leadership was considering a quick withdrawal, and had not yet committed to a lengthy occupation. This finding will come as a surprise to many researchers, since it was long assumed that the Soviets were fully committed to an extended counter-insurgency campaign after the 1979 invasion. And Kalinovsky provides important new information on rivalries in the Soviet bureaucracy, as it related to Afghanistan (such as a major military-KGB split during the Gorbachev era).

An important strength of this article is its excellent research, and its inclusion of new primary source materials from the ex-Soviet archives. Of course, the archival record remains far from complete, and the author is perfectly frank about this limitation. There is, for example, “almost no documentation” for the period of Konstantin Chernenko (59). And the declassified documents that have been released are somewhat skewed, since they were mostly made available during the Boris Yeltsin presidency, “as a way to embarrass the [former] Soviet government” (47). Nevertheless, it is clear that Kalinovsky has unearthed quite a bit of new documentation, and it adds considerably to our understanding on this vital Cold War topic.

My main criticism is that Kalinovsky avoids the issue of U.S. policy with regard to Afghanistan, and how U.S. actions influenced debates within the USSR. For example, his description of the 1979 Soviet decision to invade omits discussion of U.S. intervention. The Soviet invasion did not take place in a vacuum. It is now known, for example, that President Jimmy Carter provided small-scale material support to the Mujahideen guerrillas six months *before* the Soviet invasion, an action that very likely became known to the Soviets and was viewed as a provocation. And if we accept the claims of Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter knew that this action was likely to provoke a Soviet invasion.<sup>1</sup> Soviet propagandists during this period often emphasized the importance of U.S. intervention in Afghanistan as a justification for their own actions. It now appears that Soviet propaganda contained a kernel of truth in this case. Thus, it seems highly probable that U.S. support for the Mujahideen enhanced Soviet paranoia about perceived U.S. “aggression” in the region; and therefore affected their decision making and contributed to the invasion. Kalinovsky mentions Soviet fears about perceived U.S. meddling, but he neglects to mention that U.S. policy served to enhance these fears. None of this can excuse the Soviet Union for undertaking an illegal invasion. Nevertheless, the U.S. intervention is part of the context of this invasion, and it deserves to be mentioned.

Secondly, Kalinovsky neglects to consider how the United States impeded UN-sponsored peace talks and served to prolong the Soviet occupation. This U.S. role in the negotiation

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<sup>1</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski interviewed in “Les Révélations d’un ancien conseiller de Carter: ‘Oui la CIA est entrée en Afghanistan avant les Russes...’” *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 15:-21 January, 1998. English translation available in David N. Gibbs, “Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion in Perspective,” *International Politics* 37:2 (June 2000). See also discussion in David N. Gibbs, “Reassessing Soviet Motives for Invading Afghanistan: A Declassified History,” *Critical Asian Studies* 38:2 (Spring 2006).

process has been documented at length by Diego Cordovez and Selig Harrison in a 1995 study.<sup>2</sup> Cordovez and Harrison show that a hardline faction within the Reagan administration led by CIA Director William Casey viewed the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan as a strategic asset for U.S. policy, since it was “bleeding” the Soviets. These hardliners sought to prolong the bleeding, and a U.S. general offered the following statement: “Casey would say that he wanted them out, but he actually wanted them to send more and more Russians down there and take casualties.”<sup>3</sup> And similarly, Secretary of State George Schultz would later criticize “the hard right [in the administration], who I suspected did not really want the Soviets to leave Afghanistan; they preferred to ‘bleed’ them to death through indefinite continuation of the war.”<sup>4</sup> Cordovez and Harrison emphasize that these actions did indeed prolong the Soviet occupation, and the war. While Kalinovsky does cite the Cordovez/Harrison study, he does so only in passing. Overall, these U.S. activities both before and during the occupation of Afghanistan constitute vital context in understanding the Soviet policy; but they are unmentioned by Kalinovsky, and these omissions detract from what is otherwise a fine study.

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<sup>2</sup> Diego Cordovez and Selig S. Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Cordovez and Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, 103. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.