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The War in Afghanistan and Its Legacies

*Ed. Note: My colleague, Andreas Hilger (1967-2024), passed away suddenly in June. Andreas was a highly engaged and popular university teacher of Russian history. His field of expertise was the Cold War and Soviet relations with South Asia, especially India. The review below is one of his last contributions.*

Yaacov Ro’i, professor emeritus at the University of Tel Aviv, has made a name as a specialist in the history of Islam in the USSR and Soviet relations with the Middle East. In his current work, he focuses on the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and its effects on the USSR and emerging Russia. Even though the book essentially focuses on Soviet perspectives—political, military, and social—on the war in Afghanistan, it becomes clear time and again how alien and hostile Moscow's supposed internationalist assistance remained to the vast majority of the Afghan population.[1]

The political leadership in Moscow made its fundamental decision to intervene without taking into account the real situation and probable challenges. Similarly, the mission was continued and even intensified for years. Early, well-founded objections to the idea of “solving the problem of Afghanistan solely by military means” were ignored (p. 38). According to estimates, up to 750,000 Soviet citizens were deployed in total, at least 525,000 soldiers, 90,000 KGB members, and 5,000 men from the Ministry of the Interior, as well as civilian forces (pp. 57-58). The operational strength of the so-called Limited Contingent reached up to 120,000 men at its peak. The findings of the book on the Politbureau’s performance once again confirm the general state of research. In addition, the book provides a readable examination of the hectic military preparations for the invasion. Initially, under politically generated time pressure conscripts from the neighboring Soviet
Central Asian republics made up an above-average proportion of the invasion troops. They were often completely unprepared for the conditions under which they had to live and fight in Afghanistan. The national balance of the troops soon changed. In contrast, complaints about a recruitment policy that privileged the sons of social elites and different nationalities continued to surface, especially since various shortcomings of the Soviet war machine were never rectified. Significantly, the official figures on the wounded and sick, over 70 percent, were "unheard of in modern armies" (p. 90). Besides, the volume definitively dismisses earlier assumptions that Central Asian soldiers felt a special closeness to the Afghan population and were therefore disloyal to the Soviet army.

Overall, the value of the publication lies less in the detailed reconstruction of decision-making processes in the Politburo on war and withdrawal. Rather, following other research, the book brings together various Soviet perspectives on the war and its far-reaching consequences for the population, military, and social system of the USSR. Not only the political and military leadership have their say, but also soldiers including prisoners of war, their families, and the general society.

The author is not only able to draw on his competent knowledge of the research literature and relevant archival documents as well as published memories. In addition, he extensively consulted the contemporary press and analyzes works of official art and the subculture of the soldiers themselves—known as "Afgantsy." Besides, in the early 1990s Ro'i himself conducted a total of three major surveys in eleven successor states of the USSR (excluding the Baltic states and Georgia): One among 221 former active soldiers who had served in Afghanistan, one among 229 Soviet citizens in the new republics, and one among Soviet Jews who had emigrated to Israel by 1992/93; these also included some veterans of the Afghan war. They were supplemented by several in-depth interviews conducted between 2012 and 2017. Numerous tables and quotations present the findings from surveys and interviews. As a reader, one would have liked to know why almost thirty years passed between the actual collection of sources in the 1990s and the publication of the volume. Certainly, the author's efforts to develop the given additional sources were time-consuming, but the time gap remains remarkable.

Perceptions and opinions among politicians, the military, and society of and about the war often underwent drastic changes. Ro'i discusses in detail the ambivalent interaction between the course and experience of the war and the incipient processes of perestroika and glasnost. His analysis rightly emphasizes that the decision to withdraw was by no means uncontroversial. In addition, the Afgantsy themselves had different perceptions and interpreted individual experiences in different ways. This prohibits hasty generalizations about their attitudes during and after the war. Many displayed a militant social conservatism and an aggressive law-and-order mentality. Others in August 1991 opposed the attempted coup to facilitate more liberal developments (p. 181). On the other hand, increasing criticism of the war in society and politics also affected soldiers and veterans. The generally dwindling acceptance of Soviet policy and warfare not only contributed to undermining the official self-image of power and its traditional ideological, structural, and functional pillars. It often reinforced the feeling among the soldiers that they were outsiders in their own country and scapegoats for misguided developments and decisions. The blatant lack of care in terms of equipment, medical treatment, psychological support, and housing, for example, certainly contributed to this perception. Added to this was the lack of official recognition, which also precluded social honors. The official USSR spoke of "internationalist support," not of war. It was not until 1985 that veterans of the war took part in the revolutionary parade in Moscow for the first time (pp. 137-149). So, it was a long time before
Gorbachev openly spoke of the "bleeding wound" of Afghanistan in 1986.

Overall, Ro'i describes in a multifaceted and differentiated way how the war could serve as an accelerator and enabler, particularly for domestic political processes in the USSR. It definitely intensified crises in the system and made them visible. However, the war also could be an obstacle to change: for example, in April 1989 the high-ranking Afghanets Igor Rodionov had protests in Tbilisi shot up (p. 134).

The depiction of the large-scale Soviet military operation and its consequences gains a completely new topicality due to the year of publication, 2022. At the same time new developments in the Ukraine lead to new interpretations. The analysis automatically raises the question of continuities from the late Soviet to recent Russian foreign and domestic policy, social perceptions, reasoning, and behavior. In January 1980, for example, Leonid Brezhnev fantasized about foreign conspiracies that made Afghanistan a threat to the USSR (p. 100). At that time, the Kremlin was convinced that its military operation would be successfully completed within a short time. As already mentioned, for years the leadership did not want to admit that there was a formidable war going on in Afghanistan. Losses were ignored or glossed over and corresponding information suppressed as far as possible, at the expense of the individuals concerned and their families. In 1983, veterans in Moscow had the impression that life was "going on as usual, as though we didn't exist. There was no war in Moscow" (p. 168). Despite this, in the 1980s many citizens and soldiers seemed to agree in principle with military approaches to political problems and the fundamentally high status of the army and military in life. Indeed, critical observers of Soviet developments noted as early as 1990 that "neither the war's beginning nor its continuation contradicted the will of the majority of society" (p. 281).

Thus, the question of possible continuities also concerns the attitude of a society in authoritarian/dictatorial regimes toward undesirable political developments, war, and political and war crimes. During (and after) the war in Afghanistan, Soviet society rarely engaged in self-criticism that not only questioned the attitudes and activities of the authorities, but also addressed its own possible system-supporting attitudes and behavior. Complaints from society about the war focused on the negative effects on their own country and on "the lives of our children, who do not understand why they were sent there, what they are fighting for, killing old people and children" (p. 109). The Soviet society's understanding of the effects on the Afghan population remained rudimentary, even in dramatic escalations. For example, fellow students of a soldier who had been convicted of war crimes against Afghan civilians complained only that the commanding officer had gone unpunished (p. 158). The view that society as a whole perhaps bore some responsibility for Soviet activities in the USSR was only formulated by a minority and primarily by (national) dissidents: "We are all guilty," declared a Baltic samizdat publication around 1986 (p. 174).

Finally, Ro'i's study almost incidentally demonstrates that post-Soviet Russia did not come to a real reappraisal of the war and its effects on Afghanistan and the USSR. The disastrous legacy can be seen, as in the case of Rodionov mentioned above, not only in the lives and careers of individual protagonists of the time, but also in social and political processes from the late USSR to Russia until the early twenty-first century. The war and the dishonest and mendacious way it was handled had an important impact on the final phase of the Soviet empire. In addition, they significantly influenced the difficult post-imperial transformation processes in Russia and, as of 2024, seem, in combination with other factors, to have contributed to limiting opportunities for political and social development.
Note


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