

most useful for those unfamiliar with Gray's work or in search of a convenient, single-volume collection of his contributions to the Strategic Studies Institute over the past 7 years. **JFQ**

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The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan

by Gregory Feifer

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Reviewed by

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Gregory Feifer, a National Public Radio correspondent in Moscow, returns to the Soviet trauma in Afghanistan, just as that country replaces Iraq in the public debate. Once thought won and relegated to the status of a secondary front in the war on terror, Afghanistan—"the crossroad of empires," Feifer reminds us—has again attracted the attention of the United States, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and the broader international community.

The problems now confronted in Afghanistan exist in large part due to events set in motion by the sudden rise of a communist government in Kabul in 1978. Moscow was unprepared for the putsch that brought Hafizullah Amin to power, and his cabal appeared to the Soviets even less prepared to exercise control.

The motives behind the Soviet invasion have long been a matter

of mystery and speculation. At the time, it was seen as a naked land grab, the first step through India, Iran, or Pakistan toward the open sea. But the Soviets probably never sought so far-fetched a notion as a year-round port on the Indian Ocean. Steve Coll in *Ghost Wars* wrote that the invasion intended to shore up a friendly but weak communist regime in a country whose ethnic and religious politics the Politburo did not understand, a viewpoint that Feifer shares. Feifer also notes that mutinies by the Afghan army, plus a nascent revolt in Herat, alarmed Soviet authorities enough to warrant an increased stream of weapons, materiel, and advisors.

But at least as important in Afghanistan for the Soviet mind was American regional influence. The Islamic Revolution in Iran, if anything, increased Politburo concern. After the fall of the shah, they reasoned, the Americans would certainly search for other geopolitical points of entry in Central Asia to hem in the Soviet Union.

Intriguingly, Feifer argues that the Soviets did not intend to invade and occupy Afghanistan at all. The historical record, such as exists in the occasionally murky Soviet archives, reveals nothing resembling a direct invasion order. There is simply one page of handwritten notes from a Politburo meeting of December 12, 1979, where the critical decision took place.

The document, written by Konstantin Chernenko—who was not yet General Secretary—notes only that certain "measures" be taken. Defense Minister Dmitri Ustinov, a consummate apparatchik without military experience who was abetted by a diffuse Soviet bureaucracy, in effect executed an invasion without an invasion order.

This may be difficult to believe, given the scale of the "limited contingent" that followed: elements of the 40th Army, including the 108th Motorized Rifle Division (MRD), 5th MRD,

345th Separate Paratroop Regiment, 860th Separate Motorized Rifle Regiment, 56th Separate Air Assault Brigade, 2^d Air Defense Brigade, and 34th Composite Aviation Corps. On December 27, 1979, Soviet forces assaulted Herat, Bagram, Kabul, and Kandahar.

Special forces and KGB units had set up in the capital with orders to decapitate the Amin regime and install a replacement, Mohammad Taraki. The operation was badly coordinated. The KGB's botched attempt to poison Amin was discovered when a Soviet embassy doctor in Kabul intervened. No sooner had Amin recovered than Soviet *spetsnaz* units stormed the Taj-Bek Palace outside Kabul, killing Amin in front of the doctor who had aided him and his family.

Given daily experience during the following decade, the unintended nature of the Soviet adventure becomes more comprehensible. Soldiers lived in appalling conditions, fought with substandard gear, and hunted an enemy they did not understand. Local markets were well stocked with fresh fruits and vegetables, modern electronics, and warm clothes they could not find at home. This imbalance—a bizarre inequity for young soldiers of a superpower to experience in so poor a country—quickly corrupted the occupation forces. What began as an exchange of World War II-era rations for fresh produce escalated to the sale of weapons and equipment, theft, looting, and murder. The systemic inadequacies of the Soviet political and economic system compounded the immense violence wreaked by Soviet forces as they seeded the country with land mines, carpet bombed, and destroyed whole villages. With such benefactors, it becomes clear Kabul could never survive.

If the mystery surrounding the invasion remains impenetrable, Feifer unfortunately casts little light on the fateful decision to withdraw. Mikhail Gorbachev advocated a pullout long before

he ascended as General Secretary. His agenda seems clear in retrospect, of course, but Feifer only infers that Afghanistan was a distraction from his larger vision. He does not explore how Gorbachev linked Afghanistan to the larger problems he faced.

Given such treatment, it may be easy to forget the scale of the commitment: 620,000 Soviets served in Afghanistan from 1979–1989, even though no more than 150,000 were deployed at a time. The official death count was 12,833, but Feifer reports that number may be closer to 75,000. A staggering 469,685 became ill or wounded, in large measure due to entirely preventable dysentery, hepatitis, and typhus. The Soviets lost 118 jets, 333 helicopters, 147 tanks, 1,314 armored vehicles, and 11,369 trucks.

It would be interesting to explore the historical context of the commitment. The Soviet military consumed 25 percent of the gross domestic product. Soviet military personnel numbered in the millions, armed with thousands of combat aircraft, helicopters, and tanks. Given the experience of the Great Patriotic War, during which 6.3 million Soviet soldiers perished, the Soviet Union could have fought indefinitely in Afghanistan.

But Feifer only hints at such context here. Afghanistan was the Soviet Vietnam, we remember from the time, and Feifer insinuates that Iraq is America's Afghanistan. Then what is the American Afghanistan? Feifer most intriguingly evokes, on the very last page, the wreckage of European imperialism on the shoals of the 1956 Suez Canal adventure. But as with this and other historical analogies, Feifer does not provide enough depth for a proper comparison. **JFQ**

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