

# افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نیاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد  
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

[www.afgazad.com](http://www.afgazad.com)

[afgazad@gmail.com](mailto:afgazad@gmail.com)

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

The Wall Street Journal, Book Review

## Moscow vs. the Mujahideen

By Brian M. Downing

11/12/2011

The Soviet war in Afghanistan (1979-89) has passed from being the subject of angry international debate to the object of calm historical inquiry, but given the current conflict there, the period retains a certain urgent resonance. Two new books shed useful light on those days. In "Afgantsy," Rodric Braithwaite, the British ambassador in Moscow at war's close, explores the Soviets' decision to intervene, the experience of soldiers and the war's effects back home. The book is based on interviews with senior government officials and soldiers of all ranks. In "A Long Goodbye," Artemy Kalinovsky, a Western-educated academic, presents a more formal, highly detailed study of the Soviet withdrawal.

**A Long Goodbye:  
The Soviet  
Withdrawal From  
Afghanistan**  
By Artemy M.  
Kalinovsky  
Harvard, 304 pages,

Mr. Braithwaite examines the decision to intervene in some detail. In the late 1970s, the communist Afghan government, newly installed by a coup, attempted to modernize agriculture, education and the state, but heavy-handedness and rapid implementation triggered formidable opposition among Afghans. U.S. and Pakistani intelligence encouraged the revolt, and as the government in Kabul wobbled, the Soviets—who had long enjoyed influence but never control over Afghanistan—became alarmed. Moscow counseled slowing the reforms, easing oppressive measures and building popular support, but the Afghan leadership resisted. After all, Kabul replied, hadn't Stalin championed swift and brutal modernization?

\$27.95

**Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-1989**

By *Rodric Braithwaite*

Oxford, 417 pages, \$29.9

As the rebellion intensified and spread among Islamic guerrillas known as the mujahideen, Moscow debated sending in troops to install a more competent, compliant government and to train the failing Afghan military. The discussion was of course conducted in a Cold War context, and KGB chief (and future head of state) Yuri Andropov warned, rather implausibly, that the U.S. was seeking a "New Great Ottoman Empire" for the region and that the Afghan president, Hafizullah Amin, might even be a CIA operative.

An interventionist consensus formed in the aging, ailing Politburo, even as Soviet generals protested. Intervention could cause widespread desertions in the Afghan army, the generals argued, with the deserters joining the resistance. The invading Soviet troops would stir both religious and nationalist fervor in the Afghans, who would fight relentlessly to evict the foreigners. The generals also warned that an invasion would escalate Cold War tensions by prompting the U.S. to suspend arms-control negotiations. The military called for a political solution.

The Politburo interventionists countered: The Americans were already abandoning détente by rejecting the SALT II arms-control agreement, funding the MX missile and B1 bomber, and deploying Pershing missiles to Europe. If the U.S. took advantage of a power vacuum in Afghanistan and installed Pershings there, the Soviet Union's Central Asian assets would be threatened.

In December 1979, Soviet troops crossed into Afghanistan. They killed President Amin, installed a Moscow favorite, Babrak Karmal, as the country's ruler and secured the cities. But the troops almost immediately became enmeshed in fighting with the mujahideen that would not end until the Soviets withdrew nearly a decade later—an event the geriatric interventionists did not live to see.

The Soviet army was geared toward conventional war in Central Europe, not guerrilla war in Central Asia, but Mr. Braithwaite contends that it adapted and performed reasonably well, considering the extensive and unstoppable foreign support that the mujahideen enjoyed. The army adopted counterinsurgency techniques and forged

separate peaces with several guerrilla commanders, including the fabled Ahmad Shah Massoud. Special forces and airborne units were especially effective.

Many Soviet officers were careerists who cared little for their soldiers' lives, Mr. Braithwaite says, but others wrestled with the problem of following orders in an unwinnable war while protecting as best they could the young men entrusted to them. Well-connected families back home kept their sons out of the service or at least out of Afghanistan. Combat soldiers came overwhelmingly from factories and farms, prompting a Soviet general's caustic remark that they were an "army of workers and peasants"—as the old Bolshevik forces were officially called.

Mr. Braithwaite ably sketches the quotidian lives of these soldiers. Boys from hardscrabble upbringings could suddenly buy foreign watches, tape recorders, jeans and cameras in thriving off-post bazaars. Conscript pay was of course meager, but merchants would gladly barter for goods secreted from a supply hut. The soldiers could watch movies brought from Russia, and reading material was available in "Lenin rooms"; a more riveting pastime was using a rifle scope to watch female bathers.

Rudyard Kipling's accounts of life and death in Pathan lands, though frowned upon by higher-ups for sentimentalizing imperialism, won avid readers with the other side in the old Great Game. The arithmetic on the frontier hadn't changed much, nor had the fate of the wounded on the Afghan plains.

The politics and diplomacy leading to the Soviets' 1989 exit form the core of Artemy Kalinovsky's "A Long Goodbye." Only two years after the invasion, the author says, grumbling stirred in Moscow and elsewhere—within the government, the Communist Party and the military. Even Politburo hardliners began to favor a diplomatic solution, but they were an elderly bunch, and their infirmities and deaths prevented decisive action. Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985 and garnered support for withdrawal. He "was not so much troubled by the military and economic costs of the war or by the domestic political effects, although these were undoubtedly important," Mr. Kalinovsky writes, "as he was by its potential to interfere with his broader reform projects, particularly his plan to seek a lessening of international tension."

Nonetheless, international and domestic considerations complicated translating consensus into action. The U.S. preferred to see its rival squander resources and alienate the developing world. Mr. Gorbachev's overtures to America for help with a diplomatic solution were seen as ploys; U.S. support for the mujahideen continued. The Soviet leader worried that a humiliating exit followed by the Kabul government's collapse would damage Moscow's position with countries in the developing world. A withdrawal might also bolster pressure for autonomy in the Soviet Union's Muslim republics, strengthen elites' opposition to his planned reforms and heighten popular discontent.

In the event, Mr. Gorbachev had to pull out without securing U.S. acceptance of the Kabul government and an attendant cutoff of arms to the mujahideen. The Afghan

government remained in power several years, owing less to Moscow's support than to mujahideen disunity.

Neither Mr. Braithwaite nor Mr. Kalinovsky views the war—dismaying and wasteful though it was—as playing a significant role in the Soviet Union's fall. Mr. Braithwaite does note the war's souring effect on Russian society even in the early stages: "As more and more soldiers completed tours of duty and returned home—sometimes as wounded veterans, sometimes as bodies for funeral, but always marked by the experience—the war became increasingly difficult to keep a secret." Letters complaining about the war began pouring into the Central Committee and the editorial offices of Pravda. "Unlike earlier letters, which had often been anonymous, these were signed," Mr. Braithwaite writes.

Members of the state bureaucracy and of the party itself came to see the Soviet political system as decayed, errant and based on a clique of doddering old men who had started a disastrous military misadventure. The remains of dead soldiers were being unceremoniously returned to loved ones in the small hours. No mention of the country they died in was permitted on grave markers.

Mr. Gorbachev, as both authors note, eventually spoke out forthrightly about the war, chiefly to neutralize hardline opposition to his reforms. Many generals, however, opposed the less than honorable exit Mr. Gorbachev ordered; they also later blamed him for the withdrawal from Eastern Europe and the corruption and anarchy it set loose. The resentments fed into support for the clumsy 1991 Russian coup, which sought to restore the greatness of the Soviet Union but brought only its swift demise.

Neither book supports the oft-heard boast that U.S. Stinger missiles were important or even decisive in the war. American money and matériel certainly contributed to the mujahideen's success, but the authors agree with several other studies that say Stingers did not markedly increase Soviet aircraft losses; pilots simply changed tactics to avoid them. It was not Charlie Wilson's war.

Both Messrs. Braithwaite and Kalinovsky close, quite understandably, with the 1989 withdrawal. For Afghans, the Soviets' exit signaled victory, and many mujahideen went home, leaving ambitious commanders to fight among themselves with thinner ranks. The Kabul government then made overtures to several of the commanders and gained their support. The approach might have brought a good measure of stability had foreign aid continued from Moscow or elsewhere. But such stability was not forthcoming, of course—and the rule of the Taliban was soon upon the land. A decade after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, diplomatic overtures to guerrilla commanders are once again in the air. Maybe the hapless country will yet achieve a measure of stability.