



# **The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan**

*Gregory Feifer*

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The Soviet war in Afghanistan was a grueling debacle that has striking lessons for the twenty-first century. In *The Great Gamble*, Gregory Feifer examines the conflict from the perspective of the soldiers on the ground. During the last years of the Cold War, the Soviet Union sent some of its most elite troops to unfamiliar lands in Central Asia to fight a vaguely defined enemy, which eventually defeated their superior numbers with unconventional tactics. Although the Soviet leadership initially saw the invasion as a victory, many Russian soldiers came to view the war as a demoralizing and devastating defeat, the consequences of which had a substantial impact on the Soviet Union and its collapse.

Feifer's extensive research includes eye-opening interviews with participants from both sides of the conflict. In gripping detail, he vividly depicts the invasion of a volatile country that no power has ever successfully conquered. Parallels between the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq are impossible to ignore both conflicts were waged amid vague ideological rhetoric about freedom. Both were roundly condemned by the outside world for trying to impose their favored forms of government on countries with very different ways of life. And both seem destined to end on uncertain terms.

A groundbreaking account seen through the eyes of the men who fought it, *The Great Gamble* tells an unforgettable story full of drama, action, and political intrigue whose relevance in our own time is greater than ever.

## The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan Details

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Author : Gregory Feifer

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## **From Reader Review The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan for online ebook**

### **Jan says**

Solid and well-written account of primarily the Soviet invasion based on numerous accounts of both Soviet and Afghan participants.

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### **John Gordon says**

This is a single volume primer on the Soviet war in Afghanistan which looks at both the big political picture as well as anecdotes and stories from participants involved.

The author presents his material mainly from the Soviet perspective although there is some from mujahideen and CIA sources. Having little knowledge on the subject I found the book quite interesting, the lack of coordination by the Soviet command, the poor logistical arrangements and the sheer hopelessness of the struggle are woven together in a tight narrative.

The anecdotes and stories help to maintain interest and to present a personal experience of the conflict. The authors' style has similarities to Beevor or Atkinson and although not at that level it nevertheless is a reasonable read on a rarely touched conflict.

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### **Jonathan says**

Its impossible to read this book and not see similarities in our own invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. This book in its own right and its own subject matter is an incredibly informative and easy to read book on the Soviet involvement, invasion, and occupation of Afghanistan. The book flows excellently from each subject and transitions easily from political, world, and individual accounts. Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it, and sadly it would appear that those who orchestrated the Coalition invasion of Afghanistan didnt bother to read up on their Soviet history.

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### **Marcus says**

While it is undeniably well-written and informative book, its somewhat peculiar structure and author's focus on predictable side-issues leave me somewhat disappointed with this book. I am unable to shake of the feeling that it was written by a Western author unintentionally falling into the trap of giving the book's intended, western audience exactly what it wanted to hear, thereby missing the opportunity to provide a more objective analysis of the conflict.

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### **Phil says**

An all-too-brief look at the circumstances leading up to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. With great

details and many first-hand accounts of the trials and tribulations of both Soviet soldiers, many of whom were green recruits, and their mujahidin opponents, Feifer paints a picture of chaos, bloodshed, toil and horror. From the indiscriminate killing of civilians by the Russians to the brutal beheadings of Soviet soldiers by the mujahidin their heads impaled on spikes outside their camps, this is not a book for the weak of stomach.

But the insights into the almost accidental way the war began to the failure of the Russians to learn from America's counterinsurgency war in Vietnam makes for a disturbing story of history repeating itself. Reflections back on the 19th century British invasion which ended nearly the same way and the 21st century US invasion make it clear that Afghanistan is the place where empires go to die.

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### **Derek Weese says**

This is a slightly hard book to review as on the one hand I did enjoy reading it, and yet on the other it wasn't all that fulfilling.

It was enjoyable as it opened a door to knowledge about a part of the world I know little about other than a broad overview. The first person accounts from both Soviet soldiers/politicians and spy's as well as Afghan soldiers/politicians/Mujaheddin as well as the story of the cloak and dagger aspect operated by both the US and Pakistan against the Soviets was very interesting. The human story of the war was told very well. On the other hand, however, it was a little disappointing. I was reading the book as I believe we (the US) are making all the mistakes the Soviets did in the region and more. After reading this book that belief is reinforced. However it was lacking in depth. I thoroughly enjoyed the stories of Massoud, Vostrotin and the other main characters brought out in the story, but I wanted to know a little more about the strategic and geo-political context. Had the author went further into the command decisions made by Moscow and the headquarters of their 40th Army and its operational conduct of the conflict I think this would have greatly enhanced the book. Since the author was able to interview many former Mujaheddin (many had formed the Northern Alliance against the Taliban) I was hoping for more on the command decisions of Massoud and his confederates and the other tribal groups who waged unrelenting war on the Soviet forces. Also delving deeper into the shadow war waged against the Soviets by both Pakistan and the United States would have provided better context for the authors conclusion where he discusses the rise of the Taliban and Osama bin Laden.

This was a terrible war, well over a million Afghans lost their lives in a brutal and horrible conflict where quarter and mercy were concepts rarely used by either side. I think it's telling when the author relates talks with the Afghan people now who admit that they preferred it under the Soviets than us...such information is revealing in the least. Overall I think that this book would have been recommended reading as a way to visualize, through the experiences of another, the mistakes made by ones own nation in a war that is simply unwinnable. (Bringing a foreign philosophy and enforcing its sway by force of arms) But the book just doesn't go into the detail needed to bring this out. Regardless it is a good book, for a primer on the Soviet War in Afghanistan as well as a primer on why the US' own mission is faltering (we're making the same damn mistakes) then this is a good read. At the very least, you'll come to sympathize with both Soviets and Afghans caught up in a terrible situation and with the Soviet soldiers whose post war stories are eerily similar to the stories told by US Vietnam veterans.

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### **Mikey B. says**

A very vivid account of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Obviously they knew very little of this poor and primitive country prior to sending their troops in. Afghanistan was and is still today a collection of tribal warlords vying for control of their territory.

What is surprising is how ill-fed and badly clothed the Soviet troops were. They would raid and steal food and clothing from the Afghans. They were also insufficiently paid. They would even sell their own munitions to the Afghans. It is unclear to this day how many Soviet troops were killed in Afghanistan.

It also exposes the canard that U.S. aid was instrumental in the Soviet collapse. It was the Mujahideen warrior, followed by thousands of Arab jihadis in the mid-eighties who were doing the fighting. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia gave far more direct aid than the U.S.

There are obviously many parallels with the U.S. invasion of Iraq – particularly deceit and an inability to end a war, and more importantly an inability to spread democracy or communism to a country ill-suited to the modern world.

When the Soviets pulled out, Afghanistan was left with very little – most of its basic infrastructure was shattered – roads, schools, farms... The warlords started fighting each other. The Afghan war imploded in New York on September 11, 2001.

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## **Andy says**

Like a lot of people, I've always thought of the Soviet Union's 1979 invasion of Afghanistan as the "Soviet's Vietnam", but as *The Great Gamble* describes, this is a far too simplistic view of the conflict. Afghanistan then bordered three Soviet republics (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan) and served critically as a buffer from Pakistan and the Middle East, and so you can understand why involvement in Afghanistan—propping-up the Soviet-friendly Afghani government—was absolutely irresistible for Moscow.

Religious fanaticism, guerilla-friendly terrain, and the United States' extremely deep pockets; these were some of the forces arrayed against the Soviets, and while not ultimately as protracted or bloody as Vietnam, Afghanistan was terribly costly for the Soviets, definitely an early symptom of—possibly also a contributing factor in—the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Fiefer's history of the war is extremely readable and nicely stitched together by eyewitness accounts from Afghanistan. The intrigue leading up to the Soviet invasion (political fumbling, bungled assassination attempts, the KGB's storming of the presidential palace) was particularly fascinating. When writing the book, Fiefer no doubt had best access to Soviet sources (documents and interviews with former military officers) but some of the most moving reminiscences come from the Afghani survivors.

Late in the book, Fiefer falls prey to the seemingly irresistible urge to reflect on similarities between the Soviet's nine year debacle and the United States' own invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and then Iraq, but he wisely steers clear of judgments or recommendations for the current conflicts.

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## **James says**

A solid history of the subject, focusing on the experiences of individual Soviet soldiers and some mujahedin leaders, while painting in the background of the larger cultural and political/economic events in both Afghanistan and the USSR. Gregory Feifer also provides an excellent overview of the past invasions of Afghanistan and their outcomes back to the Persian Empire, along with the involvement of the US and other countries in support of the mujahedin either to create the worst possible problem for the Soviets or to support fellow Moslems being oppressed by the Soviets and the homegrown communist government they sponsored.

The story is a warning to American leaders about some of the dangers to the success of their own war in that country. Mr. Feifer notes that there are differences - the US is leading a coalition, and has not engaged in the kinds of brutal and rapacious behavior that became a norm for the Soviet troops, who routinely killed Afghans to steal their farm products or other products or even just for target practice. Nonetheless, he correctly notes that as time goes on the American and other coalition troops are becoming more brutal toward the general population - behaving aggressively in house searches, invading women's living quarters, making growing use of air strikes and artillery fire missions to fight the Taliban, and as these changes take place our people are starting to look more and more like the Soviets to the Afghan people.

As a retired Marine I understand why our troops are doing the things that are alienating the population, and how much harder and more dangerous it will be if they swear off using them, but I can also see that in the long run that harder course is the best as well as being the right thing to do.

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## **James Murphy says**

I tried to dislike this book. I thought it poorly written, and I found in it some of the most unusual use of punctuation I've ever come across. Mis-punctuation, I called it. The maps are so detailed with terrain features and lacking in graphic representation of military operations that they're not helpful at all, a serious fault in a book of military history. I tried hard to be contemptuous and dismissive of the author's emphasis on describing the Soviet experience in Afghanistan through the experiences of individuals rather than a more measured and studied presentation of facts and interpretation of military operations and political objectives. I tried to poof away Feifer's breezy skeleton of narration. I tried to throw the book across the room in a conscious imitation of Dorothy Parker. But the deeper into it I read the more interested I became. Feifer's book isn't a history of the military operations there. Though it touches on the military causes and effects during the course of the war, it's more an account of policy and international relations and societies, both Soviet and Afghan. Its picture is big. It's my opinion, though, that in telling the history of the war at this level Feifer needed to add more detail about the issues he believes profoundly affected the war, Soviet corruption, for instance, or the nature of Afghan tribal society. To pass over fundamental details such as these makes a book like this seem superficial. Despite all this, as I say, it's the first history of the conflict I'd read, and Feifer did touch all the bases, however lightly, and came, at last, to some interesting conclusions.

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## **Michael Griswold says**

In *The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan*, Gregory Feifer talks about The Soviet Union's misadventure in Afghanistan from approx. 1979-1989.

He's interviewed military figures from both the Soviet and Afghan sides to give the reader a picture of the military environment that both sides faced as the war ebbed from a quick Soviet occupation, to an increasingly brutal stalemate, and finally the withdraw of the Soviet Union, leaving Afghanistan in the state of civil war that the United States found when they invaded following 9-11.

I thought the military portion of this book was done quite well.

Where Feifer stumbles is his intended effort to link the mistakes the Soviet military made in 1979 and illustrate how the United States is heading down a similar ill-fated path in Afghanistan.

This might seem intuitive in some respects like certain overconfidence among the leadership in Washington D.C. and The Kremlin, an improper military force to complete the job (as of 2006), and a general misunderstanding of the complex challenge that is Afghanistan.

Though he makes a valiant effort in the epilogue, I feel like he should've connected the dots sooner because it just sort of comes across as "Here's the Soviet War in Afghanistan, it's kinda like the current U.S. war there."

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### **Bill Fazio says**

This book starts out reminiscent of a mafia story; alliances, corruption, backstabbing, then dives into the military and political history. I found the story to be interesting and compelling if a bit disjointed. Mr. Feifer jumps a round a lot. Other reviewers have lamented the odd use of punctuation and I concur and would add there are several spelling errors, odd for a book written by a reporter and published by a major house.

The punctuation and minor errors aren't so terrible that I would completely reject the book. The story is interesting and worth a read to find out what it was like on the ground and in the capitols and back alleys during the Russian-Afghan War. However; that's where Mr. Feifer should have ended. The book wraps up with gratuitous criticisms and comparisons to George W. Bush and American involvement in general. The book is titled Great Gamble, but Great Blunder would be more apt given the corrupt and bizarre manner in which it all began (see mafia story comparison.)

I considered giving the book three stars as the meat of it is actually pretty good, but an error in referring to an "AC-130 helicopter gunship" was simply too egregious and actually had me questioning some of the other military attack / equipment history. A simple Google search could have solved this issue and nobody did it.

Overall a decent read but take it with a grain of salt.

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### **Tim says**

Sobering, depressing book describing the machiavelian calculations of the Politburo resulting in the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. It follows that country's disintegration amid the brutality and savagery of the resistance, and reprisals over the next decade until the Soviet withdrawal, leaving behind chaos and ruin. Reading this book should make it clear that the seeds of ruthless Islamic fundamentalism, always present, took root during this decade watered by the Cold War mentality and jockeying of the West and the Soviet



Union, as well as the country's neighbors, Iran and Pakistan in particular.

The author, NPR's Moscow correspondent, also traces the impact of this particular decade in Southern Asia through to September 11, 2001 as well as to the brutal war in Chechnya beginning in 1994.

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### **David Bales says**

The Soviet Union's invasion and "occupation" (can any country truly occupy Afghanistan?) is detailed here, and is eerily similar to Vietnam. The Russians are ill-equipped and commit routine atrocities everywhere they go and Soviet troops are shocked to find Afghan markets better supplied with consumer goods than back home. As year after bloody year goes by and casualties mount, with Red Army troops getting hooked on the local narcotics and being unable to leave their bases for fear of ambush, even the most fanatical communist realizes that the war in Afghanistan had been a mistake. Soviet casualties in the west were always listed at 15,000 killed, but the author makes the case that they were actually far higher. The war in Afghanistan was instrumental in the collapse of the U.S.S.R. just a few years after they left.

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### **Scott Martin says**

(Audiobook). I decided to read this book after many years being surrounded by those who spent time in Afghanistan and having supported the missions in Afghanistan. I had read some works on Afghanistan, particularly the CIA operations against the Soviet invasion, but I had not read near as much about the Soviet side of things, how they viewed the war, and the impact of the war on their soldiers and their populace. This work pulls from Soviet archives and accounts from Afghan veterans. Their military action in some ways mirrored America's, whereby the conquest was accomplished relatively quickly and easily. However, it was in the occupation where the problems began, as a long occupation of a diverse population went from simple to brutal. The Soviet population, kept more in the dark than the American public, eventually turns on the war, holding less and less support for the conflict. The Soviets would resort to more and more brutal tactics, making nowhere near the effort the Americans did to mitigate civilian casualties. The US certainly played a major role in helping to bring the Soviet conquest to an end. For the Americans, there was no major world player per se that wrecked havoc on their occupations/efforts, but Pakistan certainly was not exactly a solid ally. Overall, there are some parallels between the Soviet and American actions in Afghanistan, there were both very different experiences/actions and must be considered in that manner. A must read for the scholar of modern Afghanistan. The reader for the audiobook was okay, neither too boring nor too exciting. The actual book might be better, but still, it would be worth checking out.

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