Thirty Years after the Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan

Katja M. Mielke

Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History, Volume 20, Number 4, Fall 2019, pp. 895-903 (Review)

Published by Slavica Publishers
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/kri.2019.0056*

Thirty Years after the Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan

Katja M. Mielke

Michael R. Fenzel, *No Miracles: The Failure of Soviet Decision-Making in the Afghan War*. 192 pp. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017. ISBN-13 978-0804798181. $65.00.

Tanja Penter and Esther Meier, eds., *Sovietnam: Die UdSSR in Afghanistan 1979–1989* (Sovietnam: The USSR in Afghanistan, 1979–89). 371 pp. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2017. ISBN-13 978-3506778857. €59.00.

This year's 15 February marked the 30th anniversary of the complete withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan. When the 40th Soviet Army completed its retreat in 1989, the military intervention had lasted 9 years, 1 month, and 19 days. This is about half as long as the US and NATO intervention, which began in 2001. The two volumes under review not only enhance our understanding of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan but also allow identifying parallels with the ongoing international engagement in the country. The state of research to date has been characterized by studies that revealed competing views regarding why the Soviet Union intervened in Afghanistan, how this affected Soviet society, and to what extent the Afghan war contributed to the demise of the Soviet Union.[1] However, this says more about the fact that research is not undertaken in a narrowly comparative

[1] Manfred Sapper, *Die Auswirkungen des Afghanistan-Krieges auf die Sowjetgesellschaft, eine Studie zum Legitimitätsverlust des Militärischen in der Perestrojka* (Münster: Lit, 1994); Artemy M. Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); Milton Bearden, "Afghanistan, Graveyard of Empires," *Foreign Affairs* 80, 6 (2001): 17–30; Mark Galeotti, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Union's Last War* (London: Frank Cass, 1995). An excellent review of the scholarly debates from 1978 to 2016 concerning the Soviet Union in Afghanistan can be found in Martin Deuerlein's contribution to Tanja Penter and Esther Meier's book reviewed here (289–318).

manner but with particular foci that differ from study to study: for example, the perspective and sources used. The books discussed here complement each other in that they shed light on the Soviet domestic, geopolitical, and social dimensions of the Afghan war.

Michael Fenzel's *No Miracles: The Failure of Soviet Decision-Making in the Afghan War* explores the perspective of the political center—the Politburo—in this military endeavor. As a senior US military planning officer with previous deployments in Afghanistan during the post-2001 US and NATO military intervention, Army Brigadier General Michael Fenzel focused his PhD dissertation (2013) on the question of why the Soviet Union failed in Afghanistan. Based on an examination of Politburo documents (minutes of meetings and debates) as well as interviews with former Soviet officials as recorded by the Cold War International History Project (Washington, DC), he reaffirms Manfred Sapper's findings from 1994 that Soviet decision making marginalized the Soviet senior officer corps when it came to choosing to intervene and in conducting the subsequent military operation. In this way Fenzel dismisses competing assumptions accepted by many scholars, such as that the Soviet Union's failure in Afghanistan was a military problem, a diplomatic mistake, or the result of Afghan shortcomings. Fenzel shows how the decisions to intervene, to withdraw, and to operate on the ground can be traced to the realm of Soviet (party) politics and were motivated solely by the Politburo leadership and their internal dynamics.

This perspective is complemented by the volume *Sovietnam: Die UdSSR in Afghanistan 1979–1989*, edited by Tanja Penter and Esther Meier. Its contributors add the experiential dimension of those who were caught up in the Soviet Afghan war at the operational level—for example, the recruits or Soviet soldiers from different ethnic backgrounds (titular Soviet republics)— and how their experiences affected Soviet society during the decade of intervention, directly contributed to the regime's loss of legitimacy, and indirectly led to its demise. The volume originates in a scholarly conference, held in 2013, that aimed to relate Afghanistan, the Cold War, and the end of the Soviet Union from various interdisciplinary perspectives. Comprising contributions that explain Soviet-Afghan relations before 1978, the experiences of war and violence by Soviets and Afghans form the nucleus of the book's insights into the social and psychological dimensions and effects of the war. The strength of the volume stems from the use of alternative sources (given the difficulties of obtaining access to Soviet and US archives for this time period) and the mobilization of a view "from below," manifest in oral history interviews, contemporary images, song and poetry texts, and Internet forums of ex-fighters, among other sources.

Ironically, it was Mikhail Gorbachev, the representative of a new generation of Soviet leaders that had no legacy of World War II experience or a similar military background and finally decided for and oversaw the withdrawal of the 40th Soviet army from Afghanistan, who called the USSR's Afghanistan engagement the "Soviet Vietnam." Besides the inherent moral condemnation, which resonates still today, this comparison stuck with many analysts. However, as Tanja Penter and Esther Meier point out in their introduction (7–8), a thorough analysis leads to rejecting the validity of the equation of Afghanistan and Vietnam along most dimensions: the number of casualties, defeat vs. UN-negotiated orderly withdrawal, and so on. In particular, the effects, or rather losses, that the Afghanistan intervention had on the Soviet domestic and international realms and its ultimate demise stand out. They do not match the comparatively smaller reputational and other losses Vietnam caused for the United States in the middle and long terms. The decision to send troops into Afghanistan marked the turning point and nadir in the Soviet policy of détente, which then General Secretary Leonid I. Brezhnev initiated after he came to power in 1964.[2] According to Fenzel (123), the so-called Troika—Dmitrii Ustinov (defense minister), Iurii Andropov (KGB chairman), and Andrei Gromyko (minister of foreign affairs)—who "thought that the invasion would be as simple and as straightforward as the Czech invasion eleven years earlier" orchestrated the intervention decision. "Brezhnev's stated objective in Afghanistan was to stabilize the communist government and then leave—which appeared very achievable to the Politburo." The fact that the secret police chief Hafizullah Amin's murder of President Taraki—turning around an incident in which the latter had been trying to remove the former—appalled Brezhnev and amplified the suspicion against Amin gave the Soviet intervention a hint of geopolitics. Thus the Soviet intervention decision was partly rooted in the suspicion that the US graduate Amin was newly seeking ties with the US government in order to move out of the Soviet orbit. However, Fenzel argues that the decision to invade was improvisational, motivated more by fear than strategic calculation. The Troika was confident of success and did not see the need to consult further with the military—the result of a historical schism between the military establishment and the Party, according to Fenzel (chapter 3). The Troika never imagined the possibility of protracted war. Once that happened, retreat was not an option.

This underestimation of risks rings a bell, calling to mind the US and NATO intervention in Afghanistan from 2001 onward. The invaders saw

[2] Susanne Schattenberg, *Leonid Breschnew: Staatsmann und Schauspieler im Schatten Stalins. Eine Biographie* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2017), 534.

the military actions as defensive in nature and did not expect them to last more than a couple of months. After almost 18 years, none of the countries supplying external troops still deems military victory realistic. The fighting mission of NATO has transformed into an advisory and training mission. US troops increased in number once more after President Trump figured out his initial strategy for Afghanistan in 2017, but now troop withdrawal is again high on the US foreign policy agenda, in line with efforts to reach a peace deal with the Taliban. This situation is reminiscent of the face-saving ambition in the Soviet withdrawal strategy, which included efforts to enable the Afghan government to deal with the resistance and run domestic affairs on its own. When General Secretary of the Afghan People's Democratic Party (PDPA) Babrak Karmal was replaced by Najibullah in May 1986, Najibullah launched a national reconciliation program calling for a ceasefire and the inclusion of armed opposition members in the government, among other issues—the same strategy that Ashraf Ghani, elected president of Afghanistan in 2014, has been trying to implement since June 2018. It is noteworthy that only with Trump's announcement of a withdrawal have serious efforts for a peace agreement with the armed opposition in Afghanistan kicked in.

Then and now, however, these efforts are mainly directed at the protective foreign power in an attempt to prove political will and convince the Soviet Union (now the United States) to stay on. Likewise, then and now, the Afghan government remains marginalized in peacemaking efforts, caught between the armed opposition and the main interventionist power. The roots of this marginalization lie in another parallel to what Fenzel describes in his chapter 7 ("Getting Out: Gorbachev and Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan, 1986–89"). When the Soviet Union decided to withdraw militarily, it stopped trying to interfere politically with the Afghan regime, although it continued to supply humanitarian assistance and weapons. All it wanted to leave behind was a neutral government, friendly to the Soviet Union. Similarly, the US government's brokering of a peace treaty with the Taliban depends on the latter's guarantee not to host international terrorist networks on Afghan soil that might carry out enemy attacks against US targets worldwide. Thus the previous objectives to rid Afghanistan of the Taliban (after Osama bin Laden's attack on the World Trade Center) or to "replicate Prague among the Pashtuns" (Fenzel, 59) have undergone thorough reinterpretation to allow for face-saving exit strategies. Overall, this leaves a strong impression that the frame of reference for the Soviet engagement in—and particularly withdrawal efforts from—Afghanistan is not Vietnam but US

foreign policy in Afghanistan since 2014.[3] All three interventions share several lines of experience and dimensions that could be productively exploited from the perspective of mutual entanglements. Such investigations constitute a research desideratum.

As Martin Deuerlein argues in Penter and Meier's volume, much of the historical literature on the Soviet war in Afghanistan is overshadowed by the Cold War and its particular worldview. Based on Deuerlein's differentiation of historical schools interpreting the Afghan war, Fenzel's analysis belongs in the category of postrevisionist scholarship, because he concludes that the Soviet Union did not engage for strategic reasons in the first place. Thus Fenzel's work puts the orthodox and revisionist interpretations, according to which the Soviet intervention followed aggressive motives based on imperialist ambitions or was a reaction to US provocation, in their place.

Both books under review concur on several findings that do away with Cold War myths that have dominated Afghanistan studies for decades. One initial finding that both publications share is the existence of a long-term trajectory of Soviet-Afghan relations that neither started nor ended with the Soviet intervention or withdrawal from Afghanistan. In the Penter and Meier volume, Rudolf A. Mark provides the historical background of continuity in Soviet-Afghan relations in his contribution about the (pre-Soviet) Russian-Afghan history of interaction up to the beginning of the 20th century. With a focus on cooperation and exchange in urban development planning of the capital city Kabul in the 1960s, the historian Elke Beyer offers another practical proof of long-standing, mutually productive relationships between Soviet and Afghan professionals in the decades preceding the Afghan war.

Second, both publications point to the contradiction between the intention and perception of the Soviet military intervention, which was only a reaction to domestic developments in Afghanistan. Reportedly, Brezhnev admitted in a conversation with US President Jimmy Carter in Vienna that he had heard of the April Revolution, the Afghan coup d'état in 1978, over the radio first and that it came as a surprise. He ensured Carter that the Soviet Union had not instigated these changes in Afghanistan.[4] Although Soviet intervention policy in Afghanistan from December 1979 onward was also commonly ascribed to the Soviet Union's imperial ambitions, Fenzel establishes how the haphazard Soviet political strategy can be explained by succession politics involving the general secretaries of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) within

[3] Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), *Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: SIGAR, 2018).

[4] Aleksandr Maysuryan, *Drugoi Brezhnev* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2004), 243.

a period of only six years: that is, from Brezhnev to Andropov, Chernenko, and Gorbachev. Each leadership change was followed by a period of reinventing the raison d'être of the Soviet Union's engagement in Afghanistan, and with the passage of time between Brezhnev and Gorbachev, the impression grew that the Soviet Union had already invested too much to withdraw. The party line—its sidelining of the military establishment—was to keep troop levels stable and allow a little more time, given that no one could be expecting miracles. Moreover, retreat was no longer an option once the United States began to support the Afghan resistance groups with money and weapons, a move that the Soviets regarded as imperialist US interference in the Afghan war.

It is interesting that the trajectory of US engagement seems in part to have triggered the review of Soviet foreign policy in Afghanistan after 2001. Michael Galbas's contribution on veteran organizations in today's Russia (in Penter and Meier) points to the political relevance of Afghanistan for Russian politics to this day. The strongest calls for and early steps to undertake reassessments of the Soviet Union's role in Afghanistan date back to the early 2000s—when it became clear that the US and NATO troops were engaged in a similar morally and politically risky endeavor. With the difficulties and failure of US and NATO policies in Afghanistan becoming ever more obvious from the mid-2000s onward, post-Soviet veterans' organizations have achieved ever-greater progress in their efforts to rehabilitate the former members of the Soviet army who served in Afghanistan.[5] The epitome came in 2018, when Russian President Vladimir Putin agreed to conduct a political review of the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan. Previously, Putin had said on several occasions that the sending of troops to Afghanistan had been a political mistake, thereby suggesting—in accordance with Fenzel's argument about political failure—that militarily the intervention was not unsuccessful. This distinction opens a path to award recognition to the Afghanistan war veterans and indicates that Russian veterans' organizations have successfully lobbied the political establishment. In anticipation of the 30-year withdrawal anniversary in 2019, not only the deputies of the Duma, the Russian parliament, but also members of the Security Council have voiced support for a new review of the military intervention. In particular, the deputies support the veterans' demand to revise the ex post facto assessment underlying the sending of troops in 1979 by the USSR Congress of People's Deputies of December 1989 that condemned the intervention politically and morally.[6]

[5] Anatolii Kostyria, "Istoriia povtoriaetsia" (Afganistan.ru, 1 November 2008, http://afghanistan.ru/doc/13279.html).

[6] "Gosduma RF planiruet peresmotret´ otsenki vvoda sovetskikh voisk v Afganistan" (Afganistan.ru, 25 November 2018, http://afghanistan.ru/doc/125007.html).

As Michael Galbas, Nataliya Danilova, and Felix Ackermann highlight in their contributions in Penter and Meier's book, the veterans' organizations are seeking the full-scale (symbolic, emotional, and material) rehabilitation of the so-called Afghans (*afgantsy*), a term used to designate the members of the Soviet forces in Afghanistan between 1979 and 1989. Their identities are closely interwoven with the role ascribed to them in the changing interpretations that have dominated public discourse about the Soviet Union's military intervention. Interpretations have varied in focus, ranging from internationalist obligation to mistakes from a political as well as from an operational perspective—given that the intervention aided the Afghan regime's scorched earth approach in a bloody war, as a result of which 1.2 million Afghans and 15,000 Soviet soldiers lost their lives. Calling the intervention a moral and political mistake was perceived as implicit acceptance that the lives of thousands of young Soviet recruits were lost during the decade of intervention when the Soviet Union should have stayed away from such an "adventure." This realization and the vocal critiques that appeared as early as the mid-1980s present the recruits as victims of an ill-fated regime's decision and as mere objects, which deprives them of glory and subjectivity.[7] Thus in the early 1990s, the survivors struggled hard to be recognized as veterans within an overall context that depicted them as accomplices of the previous regime and its unfavorable decision that brought humiliation and contributed to the demise of the Soviet Union. They were deprived of social recognition of their service in symbolic terms and materially of pensions and benefits to which other World War II and post-Soviet war veterans were entitled by default.

Other contributions in Penter and Meier's book address the experience of war and violence by both Afghan resistance groups and Soviet forces and auxiliary personnel (articles by Rob Johnson, Jan C. Behrends, Nataliya Danilova, and Markus Balàzs Göransson). These chapters fill a void in understanding the war "from below" and its transformative character for Soviet society in the second half of the 1980s. The authors illustrate how the misperceptions and misjudgments that led to the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan translated into sacrifices for those carrying out the mission on the ground in line with the haphazard Soviet policy already described. These sacrifices were not only physical but most importantly psychological and emotional in nature. First, Rob Johnson deconstructs the myth of the resistant mujahedin acting in unison by pointing out that the mujahedin groups competed fiercely, with no clear agenda for Afghanistan as a country. From the perspective of research

[7] Svetlana Alexievich, *Boys in Zinc*, trans. Andrew Bromfield (London: Penguin, 2017). Originally published in Russian as Svetlana Aleksievich, *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* (Moscow: Vremia, 2007).

on historical violence, Jan C. Behrends analyzes Soviet soldiers' experiences of violence and their conduct in spaces of violence. He points to the opportunities and constraints that the Afghan war space of violence provided for some—looking at access to consumer items and drugs, on the one hand, and practices of violence and ethnic discrimination among the ranks of Soviet troops, on the other. Nataliya Danilova finds that experiences of harassment and humiliation constitute stronger traumas among war veterans than interactions with the enemy.

Markus Balàzs Göransson adds for the case of Tajik Soviet troops that veterans from this group downplay memories of discrimination in the Soviet army. Instead, they display a previously undetected amount of Soviet patriotism, emphasizing a self-image as true representatives of the Soviet Union that had brought Soviet nationalities—including Tajiks in Soviet Tajikistan—all the benefits of development and progress, progress that would cross the Amu Darya River with Soviet troops in Afghanistan. This research disproves the commonly held wisdom of Western experts that the experience of war sensitized Soviet recruits from the Central Asian Soviet republics, mainly Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, to their Muslim identity and common heritage with Afghan Tajiks and Uzbeks and resulted in their deserting the Soviet army in large numbers. The contributions on Afghan pictorial propaganda by Martha Vogel, Russia's wars in military songs by Serguei Oushakine, and Elena Rozhdestvenskaia's analysis of how the Internet has reconfigured the collective memory of the Afghanistan war add other layers of comprehension about the veterans' subjective experiences as fighters and their positioning in the distinct political contexts of contemporary Tajikistan, Belarus, and Russia.

In the last section of Penter and Meier's book, "Interpretations and Lessons," Rodric Braithwaite, a former UK ambassador to Moscow who observed the USSR's dissolution firsthand, reflects on the failure of great powers in Afghanistan, whether the British in the 19th, the Soviets in the 20th, or the US and NATO troops in the 21st century. He points to the more positive perception of the Soviet intervention compared to the current one and attributes this difference to the long-term prewar cooperation between Afghanistan and Russia, later the Soviet Union. While Braithwaite expresses hope that the NATO intervention will consider lessons from the Soviet war in Afghanistan in its withdrawal, Fenzel's monograph presents a search for such lessons. The weaknesses of the book (a cursory understanding of Afghan PDPA dynamics and ideology, the usage of third-party interviews, an eclectic appendix of Soviet stakeholder agencies that lacks any reference to their role in the Soviet

intervention of Afghanistan, and much repetition of arguments) do not diminish its main message: how Soviet political decision making could not manage hazards created during the intervention and thus failed to withdraw early on. Among other factors he ascribes the miscalculation to the Soviets' insufficient understanding of the strategic, cultural, and political context in Afghanistan. Here another parallel opens up with the current NATO and US military intervention. The 2018 stabilization review by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) regarding the US engagement in Afghanistan since 2002 points, among other factors contributing to failure, to the US military's limited understanding of the Afghan context.[8] Misunderstandings (in the best case) or lack of knowledge (in the worst) may turn out to have greater explanatory potential for the failure of interventions in Afghanistan than has so far been admitted. Thus reading the two books reviewed here is an eye-opening experience for those aiming to understand foreign entanglements and its impact on, in, and beyond Afghanistan.

bicc | Bonn International Center for Conversion GmbH
Peace and Conflict Research Institute
Pfarrer-Byns-Str. 1
D-53121 Bonn, Germany
katja.mielke@bicc.de

[8] SIGAR, *Stabilization*, vi.