



2011-045

Rodric Braithwaite, *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-1989*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011. Pp. xiv, 417. ISBN 978-0-19-983265-1.

Review by Walter G. Moss, Eastern Michigan University (wmoss@emich.edu).

Rodric Braithwaite, British ambassador to Moscow from 1988 to 1992, has written about Russia at war previously in his excellent *Moscow 1941*.<sup>1</sup> Like that work, *Afgantsy* treats not only the military but also the political, diplomatic, and social aspects of war. Braithwaite explains that the word “Afgantsy” refers both to Afghans and to Soviet veterans of the decade-long war fought in Afghanistan, a country which had shared a border with three of the USSR’s Central Asian republics (several useful maps are provided).

The author’s clear and interesting prose is enlivened by such eyewitness accounts as that of a Soviet soldier who related: “Dozens of times I saw with my own eyes how the new recruits would shout and cry with joy after killing their first Afghan, pointing in the direction of the dead man, clapping one another on the back, and firing off a whole magazine into the corpse ‘just to make sure.’... Not everyone can master this feeling, this instinct, and stifle the monster in his soul” (228). About sixty pages of notes, comments on sources, bibliography, and photographs attest to Braithwaite’s thorough use of all types of materials, primarily in Russian and English, ranging from print and Internet sources to personal interviews.

He begins with geographical and historical background:

The people of Afghanistan are divided by race into Pushtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras and other lesser ethnic groupings. Each of these is subdivided into clans defined often by the accidents of geography, as so often in mountainous regions. And each clan is further divided into often mutually hostile families. All are ruled by an ethic of fierce pride, martial valour, honour, and hospitality, mediated by the institution of the blood feud. At all levels, from the local to the central, politics and loyalties are defined by conflicts and deals between these groups, and even between individual families. There is thus little sense of a national entity on which to build a functioning unitary state (12).

Braithwaite writes that most Pushtuns, Tajiks (together about two-thirds of the population), and other Afghans are Sunni Muslims, while only the often-persecuted Hazaras (9 percent of the population) are Shias. Four-fifths of Afghanistan is mountainous; there is little industry; and most Afghans live in villages. These geographic factors complicated the anti-guerrilla warfare the Soviet military had to wage against the Muslim mujahedin fighters, who often used difficult terrain and sympathetic villagers to their advantage.

Without minimizing his own country’s faults, the former ambassador sketches the history of Britain’s competition with Tsarist Russia over Afghanistan. He then outlines Afghan history, including the fierce rivalries between competing communist factions and leaders, who first came to power in 1978. Since the eighteenth century, he writes, Afghanistan’s rulers have had four major tasks: preserving national unity, maintaining independence from outside powers, surviving both internal and external threats, and (especially in more recent times) modernizing the country.

Braithwaite recognizes the initial Soviet reluctance in 1979 to send troops to Afghanistan. After a major anti-communist uprising in March 1979 in the city of Herat, the Afghan government pleaded with Soviet leaders to send troops to help put down the rebellion. But Soviet Prime Minister Kosygin responded: “If we sent in our troops, the situation in your country would not improve. On the contrary, it would get worse. Our troops would have to struggle not only with an external aggressor, but with a part of your own people. And people do not forgive that kind of thing” (7).

From the Soviet point of view, however, the Afghan situation continued to deteriorate, especially after Prime Minister Hafizullah Amin oversaw the killing of fellow communist President Nur Muhammad Takari

1. Subtitle: *A City and Its People at War* (NY: Knopf, 2006).

in September. Braithwaite concludes that although the decision to intervene was a “grave error of policy, ... it was not irrational” (81). Leonid Brezhnev and other key Politburo members such as KGB head Yuri Andropov, Defense Minister Dmitriy Ustinov, and Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko distrusted Amin and believed he was increasingly seeking support elsewhere, including from the US government. In addition, they feared that Afghan rebels, some ethnically related to Soviet Central Asian citizens, posed an increasing danger to the USSR’s security interests along its extended border with Afghanistan. Such fears, not any grand geopolitical designs, as some Americans feared, triggered the decision to intervene despite many serious reservations.

In December 1979, Soviet troops moved into Afghanistan, took over Kabul, overthrew Amin, and installed another communist, Babrak Karmal, in power. The two chapters Braithwaite devotes to the storming of the presidential palace and its aftermath conclude Part I of his book.

Part II, “The Disasters of War,” details the composition and operations of the USSR’s 40th Army, and its dealings with the Afghan army, which suffered from many desertions and general ineffectiveness. The Soviet leadership created the 40th for its Afghan incursion and disbanded it soon after it withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989. A useful annex at the back of the book breaks down the many units of the army, including its own air force, and notes where they were stationed. Another Part II chapter, “Nationbuilders,” describes the efforts of advisers, specialists, and aid workers—mainly male but some female—to assist the Marxist governments of Karmal and, from May 1986, Mohammad Najibullah to create a strong state and viable Soviet ally.

Braithwaite tells us much about the Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan. Because sons of wealthy and more influential citizens could avoid serving there, it was mainly the sons of poorer, less influential families, both urban and rural, who fought the war. Conscripts, drafted for two years, were often bullied by those who had served longer; and infectious diseases like hepatitis were rampant. One of the greatest dangers soldiers faced were mines, which both sides used extensively to maim and kill their enemies.

Although the book also treats the strategy, tactics, operations, and weapons of the war, we also learn of soldiers’ off-duty activities, including composing and singing songs, which reflected declining morale as casualties mounted and the mujahedin grew stronger, with considerable help from Pakistan and the United States. In addition, “both officers and men turned to various forms of corruption” (189) on an epic scale.

Despite the preventive efforts of their commanders, Soviet troops committed military crimes, including the rape and murder of innocent women and children. Braithwaite, however, notes that such behavior, especially in anti-guerrilla warfare, is not uniquely Soviet: “All wars lead to an ‘epidemic of amorality’ .... Genuine heroism and self-sacrificial comradeship do of course exist. But they are always accompanied, in all wars and in all armies, by murder, torture, cruelty to prisoners, rape, and violent looting, especially when the army is operating outside its own territory” (323).

Borrowing a title from Raymond Chandler, Braithwaite calls his Part III “The Long Goodbye.”<sup>2</sup> A crucial portion of this section deals with Mikhail Gorbachev’s decision, soon after coming to power in early 1985, to bring Soviet troops home as soon as possible. That it took till February 1989 to accomplish that proves it is much easier to send troops into a foreign country than to bring them home. Understandably, Gorbachev did not wish to withdraw troops until doing so would not jeopardize Soviet security interests. This meant finding more reliable Afghan leaders—thus replacing Karmal with Najibullah in May 1986—and negotiating with Pakistan, the United States, and the United Nations. Gorbachev also had to consider the domestic political impact of a withdrawal on his own career.

The greater openness (*glasnost*) that Gorbachev introduced in the late 1980s had the unintended consequence of spurring public criticism of the conditions of Soviet soldiers and even of the war itself; Braithwaite details the disapproval expressed by soldiers’ families. He also describes the opinions of Afghan

---

2. He also acknowledges a debt to Artemy M. Kalinovsky’s *A Long Goodbye: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2011) [diss. London School of Economics 2009].

veterans about the war and the treatment they received back in the USSR. He traces their history through the collapse of the Soviet Union (December 1991), the Yeltsin administration, and beyond.

The book's final section before the Epilogue recounts the twentieth anniversary celebrations of the withdrawal in February 2009. It also covers the post-occupation Afghan civil war, subsequent Soviet aid to the Najibullah government, and the rise and fall of the Taliban up to 2001—there is very little on subsequent developments.

The Epilogue and a brief annex entitled “Indo-China, Vietnam, Algeria, Afghanistan: A Comparison” sum up the human costs of the ten-year war. According to official figures, 15,051 Soviet soldiers died and more than 50,000 were wounded. While Afghan casualties are much harder to calculate, “probably somewhere between 600,000 and 1.5 million Afghans were killed in the Soviet war” (331). Although comparisons with the US experience in Vietnam have been frequent and often apt, the scale of America's involvement in Vietnam and the number of its soldiers killed there were much larger than was the case for the Soviet experience in Afghanistan.

Braithwaite also provides a useful “Timeline” and a list and brief overview of the seven major Afghan parties operating in Pakistan that tried to direct mujahedin opposition inside Afghanistan—by 1989 about one-quarter of the Afghan population had become refugees in Pakistan or Iran.

Although the Soviet effort in Afghanistan is not directly compared with twenty-first century US and NATO military operations there, Braithwaite does report that, on a visit to Afghanistan in 2008, he “was told by almost every Afghan” he met “that things were better under the Russians.” He concludes that “the latest attempt to help the Afghans help themselves was having little more success than its predecessor” (335).

In June 2011, after President Barack Obama had revised American strategy in Afghanistan and increased the US troop presence there, Braithwaite presented a more comprehensive and updated view in an online essay, in which he warns that “You have to be careful about drawing lessons from history: the gritty details differ every time. But you have to be foolish to ignore what happened to your predecessors. This time the soldiers are indeed different. But the mountains—and the people of Afghanistan—are still the same. The problems the Western coalition faces today are not so very different from those the Soviets faced three decades ago. The Soviets, too, went in with high hopes, believing they could build a nation, settle its politics, and depart within a year, leaving behind a secure government of their choice. It took nine years of bloody fighting before they could extricate themselves.”<sup>3</sup>

*Afgantsy* tells the sad story of occupying troops and Afghan civilians during the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. Braithwaite assesses the motives of the USSR's leadership and traces the war's aftereffects on Soviet veterans and society as well as on Afghanistan and its people. His multifaceted history is a valuable addition to our knowledge of all these subjects. While American readers will naturally want to discern here lessons regarding military operations in Afghanistan, history never exactly repeats itself—there are differences as well as similarities—and Braithwaite wisely counsels caution in applying the lessons of the past.

---

3. “The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan Didn't Sort Out the Country—Will Ours?” *History News Network* (10 Jun 2011) <[www.miwsr.com/rd/1129.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/1129.htm)>.