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Gregory Feifer, *The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan*. New York: HarperCollins, 2009. Pp. 326. ISBN 978-0-06-114318-2.

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Gregory Feifer's latest book concerns the war in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989, with an ample prologue and epilogue providing context. The great gamble of the title refers to the decision of the Soviet leadership in December 1979 to respond to the repeated pleas of the government of Afghanistan to come to its aid against swelling revolts. Feifer's research, interviews, and travel to Afghanistan were all undertaken in an effort to explain "how one of a long line of invading armies—in this case, belonging to a global superpower with virtually no limit to the amount it could spend on its military—became the latest to find defeat at the hands of the local rebels" (1). The many interviews with Soviet and Afghan veterans, in particular, furnish testimony that "may help dispel some American illusions about *our* wars and also make us more sensitive to the volatility of the regions now determining the success or failure of our foreign policy" (7).

Feifer, who holds a Harvard master's degree in Russian Studies, was the Moscow correspondent for Radio Free Europe from 1998 to 2003. He co-wrote KGB Col. Victor Cherkashin's memoir *Spy Handler*,¹ an experience that informs his useful interview here with Leonid Bogdanov, the KGB resident in Kabul during the Soviet coup there of 27 December 1979. He was later Moscow correspondent for National Public Radio and is currently writing a book on Russian culture and behavior.

Feifer makes excellent use of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Cold War and International History Project, as well as English-language scholarship² and Russian-language documents.³ His years spent studying, living in, and reporting on the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation lend special authority and reliability to his writing.

The book is organized as a chronological narrative of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, moving back and forth from the highest level of decision making in the Politburo to the experiences of individual Soviet officials and soldiers. While the frequent vignettes of individuals add a personal touch and illustrate Russian attitudes and emotions concerning the Afghans and the war, they are distractions from the core narrative.

The great strength of Feifer's work is his perceptive and balanced presentation of the viewpoints, goals, and inner workings of the Soviet government and military. An important antidote to the poisoned atmosphere of Cold War fears and distortions, it is most useful in explaining the "Old Thinking" behind the decision to intervene in 1979 and the "New Thinking" that led to the withdrawal in 1989.

The Soviets intervened reluctantly at the strong urging of the Communist-led Afghan government. Feifer reconstructs their key decision-making meeting as follows:

Dusk had already fallen in the late afternoon of December 12, 1979, when select members of the Soviet Union's top leadership gathered in a Kremlin conference room. They were there for a brief discussion of ... [the] political crisis in the USSR's southern neighbor, Afghanistan. General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev presided. He had less than two years to live.... Chief Party ideologue Mikhail Suslov, KGB Chairman Yuri Andropov, Foreign

1. Subtitle: *Memoir of a KGB Officer: The True Story of the Man Who Recruited Robert Hanssen and Aldrich Ames* (NY: Basic Books, 2005).

2. Esp. Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (NY: Penguin, 2004), Lester W. Grau, ed. and tr., *The Bear Went over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan* (Washington: Nat'l Defense U Pr, 1996), Valentin Runov et al., *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost*, ed. and tr. Lester W. Grau and Michael A. Gress (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2002), and Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 1995).

3. Esp. those compiled in Alexander Liakhovskii's comprehensive account of the war, *Tragediia i doblest' Afghana* [The tragedy and valor of Afghanistan] (Moscow: Nord, 2004).

Minister Andrei Gromyko, and Defense Minister Dmitri Ustinov also attended.... Although the imposing six-foot tall Suslov was generally regarded as Brezhnev's likely successor, most Politburo decisions were made by a triumvirate of Andropov, Gromyko, and Ustinov. They simplified and prettified the issues in their reports to Brezhnev What Suslov and the others actually said during their meeting—or exactly how the group reached its consensus that day—will almost certainly never be known....What is clear, however, is that when the de facto Soviet leadership emerged from its discussion it had made the decision to invade. (9–11)

Feifer concludes by reproducing a photocopy of “The only document recording at least a summary of the critical meeting ... a cryptic note handwritten by [Konstantin] Chernenko ... that remained ‘super top secret’ for many years” (13–14).

The Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan in order to improve their relations with China and the West, an essential move according to Mikhail Gorbachev's New Thinking about reforming the USSR's ramshackle society and economy:

When General Valentin Varennikov, shortly after his December 1984 appointment [as head of military forces in Afghanistan], delivered his first report in his new capacity to the Politburo's Afghanistan committee, which was chaired by Foreign Minister Gromyko, he described progress in his immediate task of closing Afghanistan's border with Pakistan.... Halfway through his presentation he was surprised to see another Politburo member enter the room and sit down opposite him at the conference table. After listening to the boiler-plate optimism, Mikhail Gorbachev unequivocally delivered his opinion: Soviet troops must be withdrawn from Afghanistan. (185)

Despite Gorbachev's promotion the following year to General Secretary, it still took him almost four more years to convince domestic and foreign audiences that withdrawal of the Soviet Army was the necessary course of action and one that he himself meant to carry out. Feifer shows that, as early as 1984, there could be no doubt of his intentions.

The Great Gamble's descriptions of the Soviet leadership put to rest the assumption that intervention in Afghanistan was motivated by the desire for a warm-water port or control of the Middle Eastern oil fields. Feifer also quashes the idea that Soviet leaders were united, efficient, and ideologically driven. Similarly, his accounts of the battles in and the withdrawal from Afghanistan prove that the Soviet Army was not defeated and driven out by the *mujahideen* resistance and the extensive international support funneled to it from Pakistan. The withdrawal came about because of Gorbachev's conviction that the “bleeding wound” of the Afghan War had to be healed before vital socioeconomic reforms could take place in the USSR. The Soviet leadership had lost its great gamble.