



**The Russian General Staff.** *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002. xxvi + 364 pp. \$17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7006-1186-7; \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1185-0.



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### **The Bear and the Mujahideen**

Since Karl Marx considered history to be a science, the professional soldiers of the Soviet Union always placed a high priority on detailed historical analysis of military operations. Throughout World War II, the Soviets collected, analyzed, and disseminated detailed lessons after each campaign and major battle. Yet, because the Soviet Union saw itself as the champion of wars of national liberation throughout the world, the one type of military operation that few Soviet officers ever contemplated was one in which the Soviet Army would be called upon to suppress a popular insurgency. This ideological blindness goes far to explain not only the Soviet failure in Afghanistan, but also the unusual nature of the official history that the General Staff belatedly published about that conflict.

This Russian General Staff study is available in English thanks to a superb translation and editing effort. Lester Grau, a longtime analyst of the Soviet military, has already produced two seminal studies of the Afghan war in his own right, and Michael Gress is a veteran of the Soviet motorized rifle forces. Both historians and soldiers owe these men a considerable debt for producing

this work, which in 2005 was re-issued in paperback to reach the wider audience it deserves.

Many of the conclusions in this study will be familiar to students of counterinsurgency in general and Afghanistan in particular. In the introduction, for example, the Russian authors bluntly state that the principal failure of the Soviet intervention was political, in the sense that the Soviet-backed Karmal regime never gained the support of the multi-ethnic Afghan population (p. 23). More practical military observations also abound throughout the book. Neither the Soviet Army nor its Afghan counterpart was adequately trained to fight the rebels, and many Soviet units remained road-bound, tied to their armored vehicles rather than pursuing the enemy into the mountains. The extreme altitudes of Afghanistan sharply diminished the lift capacity of helicopters, while ground supply convoys placed equal strains on the Soviet truck fleet. The Soviets tried and failed to make the Afghan Army bear the brunt of the military effort. When they did take the offensive, the Soviets attempted to identify and destroy the rebel command structure, not understanding that the *mujahideen* had little organization

beyond tribal loyalties. Finally, the Soviet reluctance to fight at night meant that their operations had little effect on rebel mobility and logistics.

Yet other aspects of the book are less well known. According to the Russian authors, the 40th Soviet Army, the principal occupation force in Afghanistan, suffered more than 26,000 dead during the ten years (1979-1989) of the conflict (p. 43). This contrasts markedly with official figures of 11,321 dead for all Soviet armed forces.[1] Most of the 329 helicopters lost in Afghanistan were victims not just of shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles, but even more of poor crew training and overuse of the aircraft and pilots (p. 221). In addition, the editors have added numerous facts supporting the significant but unacknowledged Soviet involvement in Afghanistan before their 1979 intervention (pp. xxiii, 209.)

In short, this is a superb study on a topic of considerable current interest. Some of the problems identified in logistics, training, and operations may be too detailed to interest the general reader or historian, but students of military operations and of the current struggles in the Middle East will find such details fascinating. The skillful translation and editorial comments of this version alleviate the traditionally ponderous style of Russian military writing, and the result is eminently readable. Overall, *The Soviet-Afghan War* deserves the widest dissemination among soldiers, historians, and the general public.

#### Note

[1]. See, for example, G. F. Krivosheev, ed., *Soviet Casualties and Combat Losses in the Twentieth Century* (London: Greenhill Books and Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1997), p. 287.

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