War in Afganistan: Parallel Perceptions in Russia and Britain

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Abstract

An account of the Soviet war in Afghanistan from 1979—1989, which draws parallels both with the British-Afghan wars which preceded it, and the American-led war which followed. Its overall conclusion is that the idea that a sophisticated power can successfully reengineer the politics of another country by force has been largely discredited.

Keywords list (en): War in Afghanistan, UK, USSR, Soviet Union, Afghanistan, Brezhnev, Najibullah, Moscow, Kabul, Cold War

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1 When the British invaded Afghanistan in 1839 Mehrab Khan, a senior Afghan official, said to Alexander Burnes, the political adviser to the British Army: “You have brought an army into the country. How do you propose to take it out again?” It is a question that should be asked of all those who intend to invade Afghanistan, preferably before they cross the frontier.
Each new invader suffers from the illusion that he will succeed where his predecessors failed. Days after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, a Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister visited the Foreign Office in London. Our historical department prepared a dossier for him on the unsatisfactory British experience in Afghanistan in the nineteenth century. The Minister said: “That is very kind of you. But this time it will be different”.

Another story has it that a senior official in the Foreign Ministry remarked to Foreign Minister Gromyko: “I wonder whether we're doing the right thing in Afghanistan. Look what happened to the British there”. Gromyko said in a fury: “Are you seriously comparing the lackeys of British imperialism to our gallant Soviet warriors?” The official hastily replied: “No, no, Minister, of course not. The soldiers are quite different. But the mountains are the same”.

In this article I examine some of the different perceptions which the Russians and the British have had of their wars in Afghanistan.

The Historical Rivalry

As early as the middle of the eighteenth century, the British and the Russians felt themselves to be in competition for influence in Afghanistan and Central Asia. The British reached the borders of Afghanistan in 1809; the Russians did not get there until half a century later; but each was already trying to spy on the territories already held by the other.

Out of this rivalry grew the romance — to some extent the myth — of the “Great Game”. For the British this was a noble matter of preventing the villainous Russians from threatening their Indian empire. Afghanistan was the key: if the Russians could control Afghanistan, they would be able to use it as a base for the invasion of India.

More sober heads in London and New Delhi pointed out the extreme practical difficulties which the Russians would have to overcome in such an undertaking. They were over-ridden by those more fearful or more determined, who believed that India could be protected only if Afghanistan was incorporated into the Empire, and who were supported by a vivid tradition of literature and propaganda which culminated in Kipling’s masterpiece Kim. But the two wars which Britain fought to dominate Afghanistan in 1839 and 1879 were failures, and the British settled thereafter for a less spectacular, but more successful, policy of controlling Afghan foreign policy through the disbursal of bribes and advice to the Afghan ruler.

The Russians were equally paranoid. In 1838 General Perovski, the governor of Orenburg, wrote thus: “If the British succeed in establishing themselves in Kabul it would be only a step for [them] to reach Bukhara; Central Asia would be
subjected to their influence, our Asian trade would be ruined, they might arm … our Asian neighbours against us, and supply them with powder, weapons and money”.

The Russians felt they could not afford to ignore the apparently unstoppable northward move of the British. After heated arguments in St Petersburg they decided on military action. They too eventually reached the borders of Afghanistan. Thereafter there was much skirmishing, with both sides sending secret agents and small military forces into the borderlands between them. But it was inconclusive, and a kind of stability reigned until the First World War.

In 1919 the British, wearied by war and overextended in India itself, finally gave up their ambition to control Afghan foreign policy, and settled instead for a policy of managing the fierce Pashtun tribes along the frontier. The Afghans promptly recognised the Soviet Union and the relationship flourished for the next sixty years. It was based on both sides not on ideology, but on political, economic and commercial self-interest.

The Russians Stumble into War

After the British withdrew from India in 1947, the Americans replaced them in Russian eyes as the main threat from the south. Khrushchev visited Afghanistan in 1955 and concluded that the Americans were planning to set up military bases there. Such beliefs may have had no basis in fact, but they played a part in the Soviet government’s eventual decision to intervene in Afghanistan in 1979. What followed, like so much else that was happening at the time, cannot be properly understood without bearing perpetually in mind the paranoia that gripped all sides during the Cold War, distorting judgment in Washington, Moscow, London and other major capitals.

By now Soviet policy towards Afghanistan was driven by four main motives: to ensure that the government in Kabul remained friendly to the Soviet Union; to limit, or if possible to exclude, American influence; to limit the effect of fundamental Islam on their own (Muslim) Central Asian republics; to interdict the drug traffic, which was already a problem. For more than thirty years this policy was successful. The Russians worked equally well with King Zahir and with his successor President Daud, who replaced the King in a coup in 1973. They kept their distance from the tiny Afghan Communist Party, a small, quarrelsome and unruly bunch of inexperienced intellectuals, maintaining contact with them primarily through their intelligence agents.

But things started to go wrong when the Afghan Communists seized power in April 1978 in a bloody coup. The Russians were probably not directly involved, though they naturally had to recognise the new government. It brought them nothing but headaches. The Afghan communists started to imprison and kill one another, as well as thousands of non-communist Afghans, the former elite, the mullahs, the
landowners, and the tiny liberal intelligentsia. They told the Russians that what had worked for Stalin would work for them. Some Soviet officials started to make comparisons with Vietnam.

The coup was soon followed by insurgency in the countryside and mutiny in the armed forces. In March 1979 there was a massive rebellion in the province of Herat. The Kabul government asked the Russians to send troops to restore order. The Politburo debated the request for four days and rejected it. Yuri Andropov, the Chairman of the KGB, argued that Afghanistan was unripe for socialism: religion was a tremendous force, the peasants were almost completely illiterate, the economy was backward. If the revolution in Afghanistan could only be sustained with Soviet bayonets, he said, that was a route down which the Soviet Union should not go. The Soviet Prime Minister, Aleksei Kosygin, telephoned the Afghan President Taraki to convey the Soviet refusal: “If our troops went in, 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 significant part of your own people.”

The Kabul government successfully suppressed the Herat rising. But revolts and mutinies continued to break out all over the country. The situation inside the Afghan party ran out of control. In September 1979, Prime Minister Amin had President Taraki murdered, took sole control, and stepped up the terror against his opponents both inside and outside the Party.

The Americans had just been ejected from Iran. The Russians feared that they might exploit the chaos in Kabul to move into Afghanistan. Amin, Taraki’s killer, had studied in New York. The KGB believed he might switch Afghan policy decisively towards the United States. The Americans deny that Amin was their agent. But with the failure of détente the Cold War was rising to a new height of paranoia as both Moscow and Washington exaggerated one another’s hostile intentions and military capacity. The Politburo concluded that Amin would have to be removed by force. Their decision was contested by the military. But when the Chief of Staff, Nikolai Ogarkov, warned the Minister of Defence of the risks, Dmitri Ustinov told him sharply that his job was not to teach the Politburo its business but to carry out its orders.

Though they later affected to be surprised and shocked by the Soviet invasion, the Americans had a fair idea of what was likely to happen, not least from their satellite coverage of Soviet military moves in the direction of Afghanistan, which had been taking place since the summer. With far less intelligence capacity than the Americans, the British were also keeping track of events. The murder of Taraki, they thought, did raise the possibility that the Soviets might move into Afghanistan. One British official wondered, perhaps presciently: “Wouldn’t we be better off with a socialist regime rather than a reactionary Islamic type that is giving
us problems elsewhere?" The British and Americans were caught out by the timing: but that was hardly surprising, because it was only at the last minute that the Politburo itself decided to go ahead. The idea that the decision was taken in early December by no more than a small cabal of Politburo members under Brezhnev is, nevertheless, much too simple. By then a large number of soldiers, diplomats, government and Party officials were busy planning the invasion that was about to take place.

17 A brilliant special forces operation killed Amin on 27 December, and replaced him with a Soviet puppet, Babrak Karmal. Two days earlier Soviet troops had begun to cross the frontier in substantial numbers. The 40th Army initially consisted of about 80 000 troops. It was an improvised force, put together in the last weeks before the invasion, its cadre divisions filled out with reservists, its transport commandeered from the civilian sector. Over the next months the reservists were replaced with professional officers and serving conscript soldiers, and the civilian vehicles were sent home.

18 The Russians had got their army into Afghanistan successfully. They would not find it easy to get it out again.

19 How the British Perceived the Soviet Invasion

British perceptions of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan were heavily coloured by Cold War prejudices, by the views of the Americans, and by the crusading zeal of Mrs Thatcher. Like the Americans, the British considered that the invasion was part and parcel of what we believed was the overriding Soviet policy of extending Soviet influence — by all possible means short of nuclear war — into the Third World. The invasion, according to this interpretation, was intended to give the Soviets complete control over Afghanistan, perhaps even to the extent of formally incorporating it into the USSR; to gain a warm water port on the Indian Ocean which would transform the strategic possibilities of the Soviet Navy; and to threaten Western oil interests in the Gulf.

20 Nothing has yet emerged from the Russian archives to support this interpretation which — like the belief in the nineteenth century that the Russians were about to invade India — is intrinsically implausible. Most British and American analysts later agreed that the Soviets had invaded reluctantly, to protect their position in a country within their legitimate sphere of influence. British analysts specifically rejected the idea — popular in the press at the time — that the Russians were after a warm water port. Unfortunately, the Politburo’s decision to send troops into Afghanistan is not as well documented as its earlier decision to withhold them: relevant KGB files are still closed, and Gromyko was the only member of the Politburo to leave a personal account of the final very restricted discussions among the leadership.
The lack of firm evidence did not inhibit the all-out campaign of public denunciation which was now unleashed by the British and their American allies. The Soviets, they said, had violated international law with their brutal and unprovoked surprise attack on a very small neighbour. The claim that the Soviet forces had been invited in was a transparent fiction, just as it had been before the invasion of Czechoslovakia. It was another example of the Soviet Union’s insatiable imperial appetite, of their claim that the so-called “Brezhnev Doctrine” gave them the right to keep countries in their bloc by force. President Carter, backed by Mrs Thatcher, called it “…the greatest threat to world peace since the Second World War…”, thus ignoring the cries around Berlin and Cuba two decades earlier. On 23 January, in his annual State of the Address, he accused the Soviet Union of deliberately moving to threaten Western oil supplies, and said “Let our position be absolutely clear: An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force”. He and Thatcher promoted economic sanctions, and a boycott of the Olympic Games which were just about to start in Moscow. Neither was particularly effective. But they then moved on to more serious measures, above all the arming of the Afghan guerrillas, the mujahedin.

Some Russian observers believed, then and since, that the Americans deliberately lured the Soviet Union into the Afghan quagmire in order to destroy it. There is little evidence for such a plot. Moreover, the Russians were under no compulsion: if they had so wished they could have avoided the American trap by simply keeping out of Afghanistan. There is however plenty of evidence that the Americans were determined to exploit the Russians’ difficulties in Afghanistan, and to make them pay for the past: as Charlie Wilson, a US Congressman who mustered support for the mujahedin, said: “There were 58 000 [American] dead in Vietnam, and we owe the Russians one”.

Different Invaders, Same Aims

The Soviet government had set itself limited aims: to put their own man in charge of the Communist regime, train its security forces to defend him, and then leave. But they also made, almost by accident, an understandable but strategic error. They decided that the best way of stabilising Afghanistan was to re-engineer its political and social system on Soviet socialist lines: to bring the country, as they said, from the 14th into the 20th century. It was an ambitious idea, but not wholly absurd. They had given their Central Asian Republics law and order (Soviet style), economic and agricultural development, higher education for women as well as men. Central Asia was similar in many ways to Afghanistan. Why should not the same methods succeed there too?
Unfortunately, the Afghan people were unwilling to accept an alien regime backed by foreign troops. Generously supported with foreign arms, money and training, they fought a guerrilla war which the Russians were unable to master. The Russians remained stuck in a quagmire for the next nine years.

The Russian’s errors were repeated, almost exactly, by the Americans and their allies when they invaded Afghanistan two decades later.

Getting Out

The pressure of public opinion in an authoritarian system can be underestimated. Even today, if you ask people in Russia what they thought about the war in Afghanistan at the time, they are likely to tell you that they thought little about it, because the government gave them no information. But in all countries — especially in countries where official sources of information are inadequate and distrusted — information is spread by the rumour mill, the “sarafannoe radio”.

And so public opinion became one many pressures on the Soviet government to withdraw from Afghanistan as people became progressively disenchanted with the war. The Soviet government had proclaimed that what was going on in Afghanistan was not a war, but a principled attempt to give assistance to a friendly neighbour. They kept casualty figures and reports of the fighting out of the media, and insisted that the bodies of fallen soldiers be returned to their families in secret. It was a policy that could not succeed. As one man wrote to Komsomolskaya Pravda in 1983: “Don’t try to hush things up: a soldier writes home, and the whole village knows; a coffin comes home, and the whole region knows.”

Western governments also portrayed their later intervention in Afghanistan as a campaign to bring security, prosperity, and good government to the Afghan people. But despite the best efforts of their official spokesmen, the unsatisfactory truth soon began to get out. The British military worried that the soldiers were not getting sufficient public support. So they deliberately set out to dramatise their sufferings. Each coffin that came back to Britain was greeted with a military ceremony at the airport, and a spontaneous ceremony organised by the people in the nearby town of Wootton Bassett. Unfortunately, the effect was the opposite of what the generals had hoped for. The public certainly sympathised with the soldiers. But they became increasing sceptical of the purposes of the war.

In 1985 Mikhail Gorbachev became General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, determined to get the Soviet Union out of the Afghan mess. Inside the Politburo he used for argument, among other things, the innumerable letters which ordinary people were sending to the Central Committee and the newspapers. Many of these were written in language that was quite
surprisingly strong. Officers said that they were no longer able to explain to their men what the war was about. Soldiers complained that their sacrifices were not being reported in the press, which gave the idea that all the fighting was being done by the Afghan army. One woman wrote: “In whose name are we in Afghanistan? Do the Afghans themselves want us to do our “international duty” in their country? Is it worth the lives of our boys who don’t understand what they are fighting for? What are you doing, throwing young recruits against professional killers and gangsters? You people in the Politburo made a mistake, and it is up to you to put it right — the sooner the better, while every day sees more casualties”\textsuperscript{16}.

Within the Politburo Gorbachev posed the obvious question, the dilemma that recurs each time a government wishes to extract itself from a failed war, and which re-echoed loudly as the Americans and their allies considered how to end their own war in Afghanistan. “We could leave quickly…” he said, “…without worrying about the consequences, and blame everything on our predecessors. But that we cannot do. We have not given an account of ourselves to the people. A million of our soldiers have passed through Afghanistan [he was badly briefed: the number of Soviet soldiers who served in Afghanistan was about 600 000]. And it looks as if they did so in vain. \textit{So why did those people die?}”\textsuperscript{17}

But there was little opposition to the proposition that it was time to get out. In particular, Gorbachev was supported by the generals. They had always been against the war, and now General Akhromeyev, the Chief of Staff, said flatly: “\textit{In the past seven years Soviet soldiers have had their boots on the ground in every square kilometre of the country. But as soon as they left, the enemy returned and restored everything the way it was before. We have lost this war}”\textsuperscript{18}. This willingness to face facts was in marked contrast to the line taken twenty years later by the British and American generals who regularly assured their governments that, with more soldiers and more time, they could deliver something that could perhaps be called “success”.

\textbf{Negotiation}

Within weeks of the invasion, the Soviet leadership started to worry about getting their army out of Afghanistan. As Mehrab Khan had warned Alexander Burnes in 1839, that turned out to be much harder than they expected. The Russians tried to negotiate an arrangement through the United Nations which would preserve what they had hoped to achieve: a friendly and stable regime in Kabul. Their enemies — the Americans, the Pakistanis, and the \textit{mujahedin} themselves — saw no reason to let them get away with that: they were determined to make the Russians bleed. The Pakistanis and the \textit{mujahedin}, in addition, were determined that the war should end with an Islamist government installed in Kabul. The brutal and inconsequential fighting dragged on, and the casualties mounted,
especially on the Afghan side.

33 Negotiations finally succeeded with the signature in Geneva in April 1988 of an agreement between the Afghans and the Pakistanis, guaranteed by the Russians and the Americans. This provided for the phased withdrawal of the 40th Army over the next nine months. The firm view in the West was that the Russians had been soundly defeated in Afghanistan because they fought an incompetent war, and because their cause was unjust. In fact the Soviet negotiators did rather well in Geneva. They got agreement that the 40th Army should withdraw unopposed and in good order, and that the government in Kabul should remain under Najibullah, a Communist who had been placed there by the Russians. This was not at all what the Pakistanis and the mujahedin had hoped for, and at least one senior Pakistani intelligence officer thought it was a serious setback19.

34 Aftermath

Najibullah’s Soviet-backed government remained in Kabul after the Russians left. But then a lot of things went wrong. A bankrupt Russia was no longer able to give Najibullah the supplies of food, fuel, weapons and ammunition on which he relied for his government’s survival. Najibullah was overthrown and later executed by the Taliban. An extremely bloody civil war broke out between the former mujahedin leaders: it was then, rather than during the Soviet war, that Kabul was largely destroyed. The civil war was ended only by the victory of the Taliban. The Soviet attempt to turn Afghanistan into a modern state had failed.

35 When the Americans and their allies invaded in their turn in October 2001, they thought at first that there were very few useful lessons to be learned from the Russian experience. One American sergeant who suggested otherwise to his comrades was told: “We don’t want to hear any of that Commie rubbish from you about a bunch of sad asses who were defeated by monkeys”20.

36 They learned better. Like their predecessors, the new invaders wanted to install a friendly government in Kabul, train a competent security forces to defend it, and then leave. But like the Russians they decided that the best way of stabilising Afghanistan was to re-engineer its political and social system — this time as a democracy. The history of the latest war in Afghanistan and its aftermath is still being written. But it is not at all clear that the West’s efforts will have had any more lasting success in modernising the country than the Russians did. If Afghanistan is to be transformed, it must above all be by the efforts of the Afghans themselves.

37 One can put all this in perspective by comparing the casualty figures. The Americans fought for ten years in Vietnam and lost 55 000 soldiers. The Soviet war in Afghanistan lasted nine years and 15 000 Soviet soldiers were killed. The latest war in Afghanistan lasted thirteen years, the longest in American history. The total
The number of Western casualties was 3,387, of which 2,254 were American and 453 were British.

We can count our own casualties reasonably accurately, though even here there are plenty of definitional and other problems. But we never have an accurate idea of the number of local people who get killed. Over a million Vietnamese soldiers and up to two million civilians died in the Vietnam war. Somewhere between 600,000 and 2.5 million Afghans died in the Soviet war.

The number of civilian dead in the latest war in Afghanistan is said to be something over 21,000, which may well be an underestimate. This war has been much less destructive of human life or property partly than the Soviet war, or than the American war in Vietnam. One important reason is the existence of smart weapons. If the Americans in Vietnam or the Russians in Afghanistan wanted to destroy a nest of rebels, it often meant destroying the village that was sheltering them. That inevitably caused the deaths of innocent civilians and created new enemies among the survivors. But smart weapons are not the complete answer. You need to know where your enemies are. If your intelligence is wrong, you may once again kill the innocent. There may be fewer of them, but from the point of view of the men who have just lost their wives and children that does not make much difference.

Russian generals will tell you today that the 40th Army was not defeated on the battlefield. In a technical sense that is true. They go on to say that the war could have been won had it not been for the treachery of certain politicians, and of the liberal press and the intelligentsia in Moscow. There are old American soldiers who fought in Vietnam who say something similar about the war there. Some among the American military and on the American Right are trying to put a similar spin on the latest war.

But failure is failure. Neither the Soviet nor the Western war in Afghanistan can credibly be described as a victory. And the idea that helped to drive both of them — that a sophisticated power can successfully reengineer the politics of another country — has been largely discredited.

Remarks:


2. Personal information.

3. I have been unable to verify this story.

4. Халфин Н. А. Провал британской агрессии в Афганистане. М., 1959. С. 33—34.

5. Anatoli Adamishin, a foreign ministry official: “What an exceptionally ill-considered decision! …We have not been in such a mess since the Crimean War …Did we learn nothing from Vietnam?” См.: Афганские уроки: Выводы для будущего в свете идейного наследия А. Е. Снесарева / под общ. ред. В. И. Марченкова, сост. А. Е. Савинкин М.,

7. The decision cannot be fully understood without access to crucial KGB files which, not surprisingly, are still closed. The story about Ogarkov is in Ляховский А. А. Трагедия и доблесть Афгана: Информация, анализ, выводы / 2-е изд. перераб. и доп. Ярославль, 2004. С. 208. Other versions of Lyakhovski’s massive history were published in 1995 and 2009. It is not always easy to use, and has not been translated into English.


10. TNA. FCO File EN021/1/1980. Folio 103. Washington Tel 137 of 9 January to FCO.


12. Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter’s National Security Adviser, boasted many years later that this was not a deliberate move to provoke the Russians to intervene, but that “we knowingly increased the probability that they would”. See in: Interview with Zbigniew Brzezinski, Nouvel Observateur, 15—21 January 1998. Translated from the French by William Blum. URL: http://www.globalresearch.ca/articles/BRZ110A.html


14. Сарафанное радио — прим. автора.


20. Personal information.

21. Casualty figures are always hard to establish with any accuracy. Figures for the latest war are taken from Wikipedia. Others are from Braithwaite, Op.cit. P. 347.


24. I am always reminded of Colonel Kilgore in the film Apocalypse Now: “I love the smell of napalm in the morning: it smells of — victory”.

Война в Афганистане: параллельное восприятие в России и Британии

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Аннотация

Статья представляет собой попытку понять природу советской войны в Афганистане 1979—1989 гг. через сопоставление с опытом британскo-афганских военных кампаний XIX в. и возглавляемой США военной кампанией в Афганистане, которая была начата в 2001 г. Общий вывод автора — история всех трех кампаний говорит о том, что вера в то, что более развитая держава может перестроить политику другой страны силой во всех трех случаях продемонстрировала свою несостоятельность.

Ключевые слова: Война в Афганистане, Великобритания, СССР, Советский Союз, Афганистан, Брежнев, Наджибулла, Москва, Кабул, холодная война

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