

**Galeotti, Mark. Afghanistan: The Soviet Union's Last War.
London: Frank Cass, 1995.**

Richard S. Newell

Volume 17, numéro 1, spring 1997

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs17_01br05

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1198-8614 (imprimé)

1715-5673 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Newell, R. S. (1997). Compte rendu de [Galeotti, Mark. Afghanistan: The Soviet Union's Last War. London: Frank Cass, 1995.] *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 17(1), 167–168.

Galeotti, Mark. *Afghanistan: The Soviet Union's Last War.* London: Frank Cass, 1995.

Mark Galeotti provides an account of the impact of the Afghan war on the Soviet Union that focuses on the experience of the soldiers sent to do their "internationalist duty." He covers an ambitious range of topics from how the Soviet leadership decided on a military intervention to the conditions faced by their troops, to the evolving impact of the war on Soviet politics, and to the personal, social and political consequences of the reintegration of some 750,000 veterans into Soviet life. Soviet conduct of the war and its impact on Afghanistan are essentially ignored, the author's intent being to factor the war's significance within the process that brought about the demise of the Soviet Union.

Given the scope of the subject and the short format employed the text covers 233 pages this work is probably best approached as an introduction to a vast and complicated historical process that will inevitably generate a large literature. It raises many critical questions and in several instances it provides shrewd and provocative answers. However, much of the argumentation is limited by the lack of sources and a tendency to argue most of the issues on the basis of impression and opinion. The format is constricted by an apparently limited effort to convert a doctoral thesis into a finished study. This is especially evident in the assertion that the Soviet military gained much practical and doctrinal knowledge from the Afghan experience. This assessment might have been tenable at the end of 1992 where the text stops, but as published in 1995 it fails to deal with important developments, especially in Russian politics and the further decline of the Russian army.

Nevertheless, many of the substantive issues that Galeotti confronts are less affected by the absence of material from 1993 and 1994. The themes given close attention include the Soviet leadership's failure to create a plan for winning the war nor a strategy (until Gorbachev) for getting out of it. He argues that the Afghan war was a minor factor in the ultimate dismemberment of the Soviet Union, but that it was a highly visible symptom of the political and moral decay of the Brezhnevian era and that great popular resentment and disillusionment over the war was stimulated by the disinformation and censorship practised by the government. Moreover, it unintentionally generated a mythology that magnified the costs of the war, thereby contributing to its own political disintegration. He also develops the point that while a considerable number of *Afgansty* (Soviet veterans of the Afghan war) came later to play significant political and military roles in the Russian Federation, little was done to honor, succor or support the veterans as a whole. Galeotti argues persuasively that the exposure of Soviet cupidity and callousness toward its own soldiers greatly fuelled the *glasnost* process which exposed a long roster (as far back as the Spanish Civil War) of hidden foreign adventures that had cost Russian lives and careers. Generally, the deeper he probes into the consequences for the Soviet people, the more telling the points of interest he makes.

His attempts to connect the causation and character of the war to its consequences for the Soviet Union are less convincing. He points out correctly that the Soviet leadership had expected their support would enable the Afghan communists to defeat quickly the scattered resistance that then existed in 1980. Instead, the Soviets were compelled to

create a counterinsurgency project virtually from scratch, which brought their forces into direct and bloody combat. In the process they learned a great deal about anti-guerrilla warfare, but it cost them dearly in political unrest at home. Ironically and tragically the great majority of the international community which condemned the invasion shared the Kremlin's belief that the Afghan resistance would be quickly overcome. It took supporters of the resistance four years the length of World War I to provide effective counter-support to the Afghan *mujahidin*.

The decision not to focus on the Afghan side of the conflict seriously limits Galeotti's attempts to explain Soviet behavior and expectations. Nothing is said about the 25 years of the Soviet Union's political, economic or military penetration of Afghanistan. The communist coup in 1978 is presented as a sudden event that caught the Soviet leadership by surprise. This overlooks the events leading up to the coup, especially the Soviet intervention in 1977 to end the festering conflict between the *Khalq* and *Parcham* wings of the Afghan communist party (PDPA). At that time Moscow was already alarmed at President Daud's purges of *Parchamis* from his cabinet and his strenuous effort to reorient foreign relations away from dependence on the Soviet Union. The coup may have been a totally Afghan event, carried out by the faction least favored by Moscow, but its proteges had good reason to believe Moscow would back them. Thus, to argue that the Soviets were left with a dilemma when Afghan resistance exploded against a vicious and blundering government, is to ignore the process that led to the decision to invade. The politburo may have had a number of salient reasons to choose intervention Galeotti describes them clearly but the underlying fact was that a failure to come to the rescue of a crumbling government fostered by the Soviet Union would have gone against the grain of Soviet behavior in the late 1970s. It was already deeply involved in penetration and intervention across Africa and in the Middle East by that time. It was its stumbling into Afghanistan that eventually forced the Soviet leadership to realize the danger of overextending the forward policy in Angola, Ethiopia and Yemen.

Galeotti raises a significant point regarding the current Russian fear of the emergence of Islamist militancy or so-called fundamentalism in the Middle East and the new Central Asian republics. No concern was evident in the initial justifications offered for the invasion of Afghanistan, and instructions given the senior officers who carried it out did not include concern over a religious backlash. That problem and the anxiety that stems from it emerged in the course of the war.

Richard S. Newell

University of Northern Iowa