

Grau, Lester, The Bear Went Over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan. London: Frank Cass, 1998.

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Volume 19, Number 2, Fall 1999

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs19_02br05

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Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1198-8614 (print)

1715-5673 (digital)

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Cite this review

Grenier, S. M. (1999). Review of [Grau, Lester, The Bear Went Over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan. London: Frank Cass, 1998.] *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 19(2), 205–207.

Grau, Lester, *The Bear Went Over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan*. London: Frank Cass, 1998.

Although the twentieth anniversary of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan is upon us, accurate, first-hand accounts of Soviet military operations are still lacking. Western authors have often been forced to base their writings on sketchy reports by *Mujahideen* rebels and skewed Soviet sources. *The Bear Went Over the Mountain* is one of the first collections of authentic, factual material to emerge from the war. It is a collection of vignettes written by Soviet company and field grade officers describing their experiences fighting the *Mujahideen* guerrillas. The Frunze Military Academy, a command and staff college for Russian combat arms officers, collected these stories into a "lessons learned" manual intended for internal use. Lester Grau, a former United States Army infantry officer and analyst with the Foreign Military Studies Office in Fort Leavenworth, obtained a copy of the text and translated it.

Grau begins with a brief chronology of the war in Afghanistan, which sets the stage for the 47 accounts. These anecdotes are divided into six chapters according to the type of operation: Blocking and Destroying Guerrilla Forces, the Offensive in Populated Areas and Mountains, the Application of Tactical Air Assaults, Defense and Outpost Security, March and Convoy Escort, and Conducting Ambushes. Each essay begins with a description by a key leader, usually a battalion or company commander, of his unit's actions. These reports usually include the unit's mission statement, how it prepared for combat and a narrative of the operation itself. Also included are commentaries from both the Frunze Academy's authors and Grau, who describe how the commander successfully employed his forces or how he failed to apply basic tactical fundamentals: security, surprise, mass, etc.

Each vignette also has a detailed, easy-to-follow map depicting the terrain and the location of combatants. Grau decided to retain Russian graphics on the maps instead of replacing them with their Western counterparts. This was clearly the correct decision. Soviet graphics give tacticians the unique ability to portray time, which in turn allows the reader to better visualize the operation.

Grau describes how Soviet planners failed to realize that the *Mujahideen* would not accommodate Soviet Army tactics by fighting a traditional, European-style, high-intensity conflict. Soviet motorized tactics did not have the equipment or the flexibility to conduct operations against an uncooperative, deceptive enemy. Tanks were not very effective in mountainous terrain and Soviet mechanized infantrymen were not equipped or trained to fight while separated from their vehicles. When rebel forces began to withdraw to avoid becoming decisively engaged, heavily laden Soviet infantrymen could not pursue them for more than a few kilometers.

Tactical innovation did eventually occur. Soviet commanders successfully employed helicopters to insert reconnaissance and specialized infantry forces. When used as blocking forces, these troops repeatedly achieved surprise and destroyed unsuspecting rebel units. As Grau vividly points out, however, the lack of soldiers in these units, as

well as limited helicopter support, did not allow commanders to fully exploit this advantage.

Several groups will benefit from the successes and failures outlined in this book. First, the book will stimulate new respect among junior officers and non-commissioned officers for tactical concepts that are often forgotten. These doctrinal fundamentals "come alive" as their Soviet counterparts wrestle with the difficulties in providing adequate security, achieving surprise and controlling maneuvering units. More importantly, however, these junior leaders will learn the devastating consequences of undisciplined behavior: mission failure and increased casualties.

Military analysts and historians will also benefit from this book. *The Bear Went Over the Mountain* provides scholars with an unprecedented local history of the war through the eyes of junior leaders. Additionally, social historians can begin to fully understand the frustrations of veterans when they returned home and the personal loss suffered by soldiers and their families.

Thirdly, senior military leaders and policymakers can apply several of the lessons learned in this book when dealing with current reform proposals. The successful use of air assault forces to seize key terrain and to establish blocking positions provides ammunition for critics who claim the American 82d Airborne Division is an obsolete Cold War relic. Likewise, the success of Soviet separate motorized rifle brigades may hasten the development of recently proposed "strike force packages" and influence the new division force structure changes being undertaken by the United States Army.

The Bear Went Over the Mountain is a significant contribution to the understanding of the Soviet experience in Afghanistan. Lester Grau's detailed analysis is a welcome addition to a much-neglected segment of history.

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