



The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan

By Gregory Feifer

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“Fascinating....A highly readable history of the conflict.” —*New York Times Book Review*

In *The Great Gamble*, a groundbreaking account of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, former NPR Moscow correspondent Gregory Feifer vividly depicts the war that contributed greatly to the demise of the USSR, and that offers striking lessons for the 21st century, as well. Told from the perspective of the Russians who fought it, *The Great Gamble* offers valuable insight into the history of Afghanistan’s troubled government and the rise of the Mujahideen and Al-Qaeda. In the words of the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, “Feifer has done truly extraordinary research... For all its heft, [*The Great Gamble*] is an effortless read—an unusual and gratifying combination.”

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Editorial Review

From [The New Yorker](#)

Feifer's history of the Soviet misadventure in Afghanistan, in the nineteen-eighties, comes just in time for a proposed expansion of the seven-year-old American effort there. It ought to be instructive, because the Soviet experience (an increasingly senseless conflict) closely mirrors our own—a lightly contested invasion later thwarted by a homegrown resistance and the Afghan tradition of shifting allegiances. Feifer assiduously chronicles Soviet errors; some, like the indiscriminate use of explosives when searching villages and the shelling of wedding parties mistaken for bands of the enemy, have close analogues in the current war. Yet, strangely, having pointed out all the parallels, Feifer persists in thinking of the American venture as a historic opportunity undermined by the second front, in Iraq, rather than as intrinsically hopeless.

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From [Booklist](#)

Feifer's account of the Soviet Union's 1979 invasion and 10-year occupation of Afghanistan from 1979–89 builds on considerable original research and on Russian-language histories not available in English.

Emphasizing the experiences of Soviet personnel sent to Afghanistan, Feifer portrays their war within the context of political and military decisions that led to their fighting in Afghanistan. The actual decision by Soviet leaders to invade was, as far as Feifer can discover, a muddle. It came after the Communist government in Kabul, unable to quash violent resistance to its program, split apart in bloody factional fighting. But by staging a coup to install their stooge Babrak Karmal in power, the Soviets took the war into their own hands and escalated it accordingly. Their major offensives, according to Feifer, never delivered a strategic victory, though they tended to prevail in individual battles depicted in the stories of several Soviet officers and soldiers. Tracing the arc of the Soviets' military disillusionment in Afghanistan, Feifer, who is an NPR reporter in Moscow, provides essential historical background to the present war in Afghanistan. -- Gilbert Taylor

Review

"This is a provocative and important book, telling us what the Soviet military was thinking and feeling as it lost its war in Afghanistan. Gregory Feifer vividly shows that their campaigns there amounted to a manual of how not to do it." (Thomas Ricks, author of *Fiasco* and *The Gamble*)

"Feifer's thoughtful, deliberative use of eyewitness testimony gives an intensely close-up sense of what the war was like for those who fought it." (Kirkus Reviews)

"Feifer brings to life in spirited detail the bloody, eight-year struggle that killed a million Afghans and tens of thousands of Russians and broke the back of the Soviet Union, which disappeared within two years of the war's end. You think it can't happen to us? Read Feifer." (Thomas Powers, author of *Heisenberg's War*)

"Tracing the arc of the Soviets' military disillusionment in Afghanistan, Feifer, who is an NPR reporter in Moscow, provides essential historical background to the present war in Afghanistan." (Booklist)

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