

## Book Reviews

Arnold, Anthony, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion in Perspective*. Stanford, California: Hoover Institution Press, 1981.

Chaliand, Gérard, *Report From Afghanistan*. New York: Viking, 1982.

Marks, Alfred L., *The Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan*. Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1981.

Newell, Nancy Peabody and Richard S. Newell, *The Struggle for Afghanistan*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1981.

The average North American, or European for that matter, may be forgiven if the war in Afghanistan is not high on his list of priorities. In the numbing wake of martial law in Poland, the war in the Falklands and the massacre in Beirut, it may be difficult to recall that barely three years ago the Afghan crisis was almost "the only show in town"—its single competitor being the hostage crisis in Iran. Occasionally we are given short, sharp reminders that the war continues. Recently, for example, the U.S. State Department made one more pitch in its ongoing campaign to convince a skeptical or unconcerned world that the Soviet forces are using toxic chemical weapons in Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> But time marches on, and even within the strategic studies community, Afghanistan is history, a watershed in international affairs against which subsequent events and decisions may be judged.

This is not to suggest that such considerations are unimportant, merely that they are not the only ones worthy of scholarly examination. For the student of low-intensity conflict, the Soviet invasion and the war that then ensued are themselves significant issues. They raise fundamental questions about Soviet political-military crisis management, about Soviet intervention doctrine and capabilities, and about the conduct and prospects of resistance operations. Can we learn anything about the exercise of power from this particular exercise of power?

It was with these questions in mind that the reviewer addressed the books listed above. These studies share a number of common features. First, in each case the Soviet invasion is the centerpiece around which the rest of the study hangs; indeed, the invasion provided the *raison d'être* for these works. All are based on research undertaken in 1980, in the immediate aftermath of the invasion. Published after Afghanistan ceased to be front page news, all reflect the mood of 1980: Afghanistan as the most visible manifestation of an intensified crisis in East-West relations. Yet none fits easily into the category of "instant history" and only Chaliand's could be termed "journalism." Three of the four books were written by Americans working in the

United States during the crisis. Although Anthony Arnold and the Newells have professional experience in Afghanistan, Chaliand provides the only first hand account, based on his trips to Afghanistan in 1980.

Second, the books address, from differing perspectives and in varying degrees of depth, the historical setting that provided the backdrop to the invasion. Soviet-Afghan relations is the obvious common focus. Arnold takes a conservative "long view," detailing an historical record of Soviet involvement in Afghan affairs. Alfred Monks takes a similar view. Gérard Chaliand, on the other hand, comes at the problem from what might be described as a "New Left" or "Third World" perspective. He starts by placing the crisis in the context of deteriorating East-West relations. The Newell's approach might best be described as a blend of political history and anthropology; theirs is the most detailed and scholarly analysis.

The four books share at least one more feature in common. Each concludes by offering some policy options for the West, and here there is a surprising degree of consensus with three of the four urging the West to provide political and material support to the Afghan resistance. Only Monks, concerned with broader issues of East-West policy-making, does not address this option.

Turning to the questions raised earlier, one point is worth making at the outset: no one in the West can say with any degree of certainty *why* the Soviet leadership decided that an invasion and coup was the appropriate course of action in December 1979. Sovietology, or "Moscow-Gazing" as it is sometimes called, is an arcane practice and even the best estimates amount to informed guesswork. To draw as complete a picture as possible one would have to be conversant not only with the decision-making process in the Politburo and the military command structure (implying some degree of familiarity with the decision-makers themselves), but also with political and philosophical intangibles such as foreign policy objectives, the role of ideology in policy-making, and the concept of "Correlation of Forces."<sup>2</sup> A daunting task and thus, no small wonder that only one of the authors chose to make it the focus of his study. Relying heavily on Soviet *public* sources, such as speeches, statements and reports quoted in *Pravda*, Monks concludes that the decision to intervene was based on four factors: traditional Russian/Soviet concern for secure borders, the emergence of "hard-line" elements in the decision-making bodies, fear of the impact of the defeat of a Soviet client on Soviet muslims and on other members of the "Socialist Camp," and, the need to maintain a credible Soviet presence in the region.<sup>3</sup>

He may be right, although this reviewer suspects that it is not the whole story. Most Sovietologists would suggest that he is on tenuous ground when discussing the potential influence of "hard-liners" on decision-making. Relying as it does on interpretation of subtle nuances in party literature and protocol, this view is difficult to prove or disprove conclusively. The consensus element in Soviet decision-making

probably sets limits on the extent of differences between party leaders. Moreover, experience of recent crises, such as Czechoslovakia and the Middle East, does not appear to provide a reliable guide to the attitudes and behavior of specific individuals in crisis policy-making.<sup>4</sup> Nor does Monks' view leave much room for miscalculation owing to "systemic distortion,"<sup>5</sup> simple pig-headedness or panic.<sup>6</sup> That said, Monks' conclusions cannot be dismissed out of hand; in respect to Afghanistan, his is a pioneering work. Only recently have other scholars given serious attention to the Afghan crisis management problem.

Anthony Arnold, the Newells and Alfred Monks devote considerable attention to the invasion itself. Although the accounts vary somewhat in matters of detail, taken together they provide a reasonably complete story.<sup>7</sup> Chaliand, on the other hand, gives the invasion short shrift. He dismisses it in a single paragraph and, given what was known at the time he was writing, an inaccurate one at that.<sup>8</sup> None of the authors attempts to infer any operational lessons from the Soviet *coup de main*, and any such assessment would have been within the terms of reference only of Monks' study. He concludes, citing authoritative Soviet sources, that in spite of the widely publicized emphasis on the *international role* of the Soviet armed forces, it is difficult to establish any links between the invasion and recent changes in Soviet military doctrine.<sup>9</sup> Monks might have gone further, for the operation seems to highlight some obvious lessons: reaffirmation of some of the basic principles of war—the importance of surprise and deception, mobility and speed, and concentration of superior forces at the critical objectives. The Soviets demonstrated their power projection capabilities and, in doing so, reminded us of the value of airborne forces. The close cooperation between the Soviet airborne forces and the KGB in strategic intervention operations bears serious study by western analysts.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, there is one more lesson which could be drawn from the Soviet experience and that concerns the *limits* of power; having the capability to act does not imply inevitable victory. This underscores the need to "think through" an operation to its conclusion and beyond, both in military and political terms, before the operation is launched.

After visiting Afghanistan and making contact with the resistance, Gérard Chaliand reached two conclusions:

The first is that it is an extremely popular movement that has arisen spontaneously among many different kinds of people with varying motives. It is not manpower that the guerillas lack, but weapons. The second is that in its leadership, organization, coordination and strategy, the Afghan movement is one of the weakest liberation struggles in the world today.<sup>11</sup>

In their book the Newells say, essentially, "Amen to that." Both studies devote considerable space to the ethnic, religious and linguistic factors which foster disunity amongst Afghans in general, and the resistance in particular. The various resistance groups are described in some

detail. Chaliand betrays his own biases by expressing some disappointment that the resistance is largely conservative and is not committed to his interpretation of "social progress."<sup>12</sup> Both he and the Newells conclude that the prospects for the resistance are bleak, and they are joined by Anthony Arnold in urging the West to provide assistance to the resistance movement. Indeed, the Newells go so far as to suggest that "Standing alone against massively superior Soviet forces, the resistance has little hope of holding out indefinitely."<sup>13</sup> Yet three years have passed since the Soviet invasion and the Soviets seem no closer to pacifying the country. The resistance has received little aid from outside and has sustained heavy casualties from Soviet operations. Yet it has not been broken. In fact the resistance is, if anything, stronger, better equipped and more effective than ever.<sup>14</sup> Even so, they are unable to inflict a strategic defeat on the Soviet forces. Time is neither on the side of the resistance, nor on that of the Soviets, thus a stalemate persists.

Three of the works are critical of Western—especially American—response to the development of the Afghan crisis. Chaliand focuses on American failure to stand up to the Russians and on unrealistic policies toward the Third World which hamper the West's ability to respond effectively to Soviet actions. Arnold and the Newells are critical of American and Western reactions *ex post facto*, which were ineffective and did not bring any influence to bear on the situation inside Afghanistan. Here the Newells go further in examining the strategic and political sources of American difficulties in South Asia by drawing particular attention to the Arab-Israeli dispute and strained relations with India.

It would be easy to criticize the works themselves for failing to offer concrete proposals for ending the war. It would also be unjust, for there are no solutions yet in sight that would satisfy both the Russians and the resistance. The objectives of these antagonists remain irreconcilable. The time may yet come when the Soviets seek an "exit with honour" from Afghanistan, without leaving a puppet regime securely in place in Kabul. This is likely to occur only after a period of "de-Brezhnevisation" in the U.S.S.R. This would be necessary to protect the ideological foundations of the Soviet regime, in order to ensure that Soviet clients and others "protected" by the U.S.S.R. did not draw the wrong conclusions from a Soviet withdrawal. The Afghan mistake, would be personalised in Brezhnev himself or his coterie. After all, if the system cannot be at fault, then it must be the men who make the mistakes. There is some evidence to suggest that Andropov and the new leadership may be attempting to place some distance between themselves and the men they replaced. But no early withdrawal is in sight and the Soviets may be expected to "tough it out" for the near term at least.

Each of the four books reviewed herein is to be commended in its own way. Chaliand's is easily the most readable, although his prejudices are the most obvious. His bibliography is extensive, but he

makes scant use of footnotes. Consequently, it is not clear what portions of the study are based on his trips to Afghanistan and what has been drawn from printed sources. The book stands on its own, but the reviewer would recommend reading at least one of the others as a corrective. Monks' study might well be prefaced: For Policy Makers Only. It is well-written and argued, but rather in the style of a position paper. Extensively footnoted, it lacks a bibliography. Clearly, it was intended for a limited readership. This leaves the remaining two books to be recommended to the general reader interested in international affairs, conflict studies or strategic analysis. Both books are well-researched and well written. Each can stand on its own as a full study, historical and contemporary, meeting high standards of scholarship. If neither is wholly objective, it does not detract from the value of the works. Anthony Arnold and the Newells have made major contributions to the study of the antecedents and the consequences of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

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#### Footnotes

1. On 29 November the State Department presented its most credible evidence to date: two Soviet gas masks it claims were acquired in Afghanistan. The masks were said to be contaminated with lethal toxins. Together with blood and tissue samples, the masks may constitute the "smoking gun" critics have demanded since the charges first were raised. See *New York Times*, 30 Nov. 1982 and *Christian Science Monitor*, 1 Dec. 1982. The chemical warfare controversy is discussed in an article by Dr. Bruno Schiefer in this issue of *Conflict Quarterly*.
2. The standard English language work on the Soviet governing process is Jerry J. Hough and Merle Fainsod, *How the Soviet Union is Governed* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1979). The equivalent for the Soviet Military is Harriet Fast Scott and William F. Scott, *The Armed Forces of the U.S.S.R.* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1979). Those interested in exploring further should examine the writings of Hannes Adomeit and David Holloway on decision-making, and Richard Pipes and Leopold Labedz on ideology.
3. Alfred L. Monks, *The Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1981), pp. 18-30.
4. Hough and Fainsod, pp. 391-95; Hannes Adomeit, "Consensus Versus Conflict: the Dimension of Foreign Policy", in Seweryn Bialer, ed., *The Domestic Context of Soviet Foreign Policy* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1981), pp. 72-76.
5. See Ronald R. Pope, "Miscalculation in Soviet Foreign Policy (With Special Reference to Afghanistan)", *Crossroads*, no. 8 (1982), pp. 108-17. On p. 25, note 25, Monks cites Georgi Arbatov as a source on the date of the "go/no-go" decision. It is worth noting that Arbatov was apparently removed from the decision-making process by a heart attack in November: See Jiri Valenta, "The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: the Difficulty of Knowing Where to Stop," *Orbis*, vol. 24, no. 2 (1980), pp. 211-12.

6. Vladimir Kuzichkin, a recent KGB defector, says that the KGB was overruled when it cautioned against deeper Soviet involvement in Afghanistan. His account, which must be viewed with caution, nonetheless reinforces the case for miscalculation and incompetence rather than grand design. See "Coups and Killings in Kabul," *Time*, 22 Nov. 1982. See also: Alvin Z. Rubenstein, "Afghanistan: Embraced by the Bear," *Orbis*, vol. 26, no. 1 (1982), pp. 137-46. Soviet and other Communist sources cited by Valenta, p. 211, note 15, suggest a degree of anxiety, indecision and perhaps disagreement, but do not elaborate.
7. The most complete account published thus far is the reviewer's "Coups and Consolidation: the Soviet Seizure of Power in Afghanistan," *Conflict Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 4 (1981). Moreover, KGB defector Kuzichkin confirms earlier suspicions that the KGB played a major role in the coup in conjunction with Soviet special forces. *Time*, 22 Nov. 1982.
8. See Chaliand, p. 43. Kabul was seized by a Soviet airborne division composed of European Russians, not by armoured units made up of Soviet Central Asians.
9. Monks, pp. 40-48.
10. Some valuable recent studies along this line include: Kenneth Allard, "Soviet Airborne Forces and Preemptive Power Projection," *Parameters*, vol. 10, no. 4 (1980), pp. 42-51; Lt. Col. William P. Baxter, "The Soviet Threat From the Sky," *Army*, vol. 31, no. 4 (1981), pp. 41-43; John J. Dziak, "Soviet Intelligence and Security Services in the 1980's: the Paramilitary Dimension," in Roy Godson, ed., *Intelligence Requirements for the 1980's: Counter-Intelligence*. (Washington, D.C.: National Strategy Information Centre, 1980), pp. 95-112; Dennis M. Gormley, "The Direction and Pace of Soviet Force Projection Capabilities," *Survival*, vol. 24, no. 6 (1982), pp. 266-76; and Maurice Tugwell, "Day of the Paratroops," *Military Review*, vol. 57, no. 3 (1977), pp. 40-53.
11. Chaliand, p. 47.
12. *ibid.*, pp. 60-61.
13. Nancy Peabody Newell and Richard S. Newell, *The Struggle for Afghanistan* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 209. It is interesting to note that Chaliand, writing in *L'Express* (Paris), 23 July 1982, has become rather more optimistic on the prospects of the resistance. See *World Press Review* (Sept. 1982), p. 49.
14. Reports during the second half of 1982 indicate a high level of activity by the resistance, with heavy casualties being inflicted by both sides. See, for example, William Dowell "With Massoud's Rebels," *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 5, no. 4 (1982), pp. 209-16; see also *New York Times*, 17, 20 Oct. 1982; *Observer*, 12 Sept., 31 Oct., 14, 28 Nov., 1982; *Washington Post*, 4, 18 Aug., 13 Oct., 1982.