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# HISTORIOGRAPHICAL ANALYSIS OF THE AFGHAN WAR AND THE CAUSES OF ITS OUTBREAK

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### Abstract

This article examines, classifies, and analyzes the studies and historical works of Western European and Russian scholars concerning the military operations that took place in Afghanistan between 1979 and 1989, as well as the causes and consequences of the outbreak of the war.

**Keywords:** Afghan War, Vietnam War, Boris Gromov, Mark Galeotti, Soviet–Afghan War, Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces in Afghanistan (OKSVA).

### Annotatsiya

Ushbu maqolada 1979-1989-yillarda Afg'onistonda yuz bergan jangovar harbiy harakatlar, urushning vujudga kelishi sabab-oqibatlarini haqida g'arb-yevropalik hamda rossiyalik tadqiqotchilarning izlanishlari, tarixiy kitoblari o'rganilib, tasniflangan va tahlil etilgan.

**Kalit so'zlar:** Afg'on urushi, Vetnam urushi, Boris Gromov, M.Galeotti, Sovet-afg'on urushi, OKSVA.

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### Аннотация

В данной статье изучены, классифицированы и проанализированы исследования и исторические труды западноевропейских и российских ученых, посвященные боевым действиям, происходившим в Афганистане в 1979–1989 годах, а также причинам и последствиям возникновения этой войны.

**Ключевые слова:** Афганская война, Вьетнамская война, Борис Громов, Марк Галеотти, Советско-афганская война, Ограниченный контингент советских войск в Афганистане (ОКСВА).

### Introduction

It is well known that any war in history has resulted in tremendous losses for humanity. Likewise, every war has been shaped by a combination of internal and external factors, while a specific pretext has often served as the immediate catalyst for the outbreak of hostilities.

First and foremost, it is necessary to clarify the terminology used to describe this conflict and to examine the interpretations that have emerged from the perspective of contemporary scholarship. In this article, the views of international historians and political scientists regarding the designation of the war are broadly classified into two main approaches.

The first approach is represented by Western scholars, particularly those from the United States and Europe, who generally refer to the conflict that took place in Afghanistan between 1979 and 1989 as the “Soviet–Afghan War.” For instance, Lester W. Grau, an American Vietnam War veteran, retired Lieutenant Colonel of the U.S. Army, and analyst at the Foreign Military Studies Office of the Army Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth, consistently uses the term “Soviet–Afghan War” in a number of his works. Among these are *The Bear Went Over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan* and *The Other Side of the*

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Mountain: Mujahideen Tactics in the Soviet–Afghan War. His co-author, Michael A. Gress, likewise employs the same designation throughout their collaborative publications.

The same terminology is also adopted by Mark Galeotti, a British historian, writer, and specialist in transnational crime and Russian security affairs. Galeotti serves as Director of Mayak Intelligence, Honorary Professor at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES), University College London (UCL), Senior Associate Fellow at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), and Associate Fellow for Euro-Atlantic Geopolitics at the Council on Geostrategy. In his book *Storm-333*, Galeotti describes Operation Storm-333 as the opening action of the Soviet–Afghan War, a special forces mission aimed at seizing Kabul and eliminating the Afghan leader Hafizullah Amin. The work is regarded as one of the most valuable English-language studies examining both a remarkable success for Soviet special forces and the KGB, and the beginning of what would become a major strategic miscalculation for the Soviet Union. Furthermore, in works such as *The Panjshir Valley 1980–86: The Lion Tames the Bear in Afghanistan* and *Afghanistan 1979–88: Soviet Air Power Against the Mujahideen*, Galeotti likewise refers to the conflict as the “Soviet–Afghan War<sup>1</sup>”. In addition, a number of Western historians and authors have also referred to the conflict as the “Soviet–Afghan War” in their scholarly and popular works. These include Zammis Schein, author of *Soviet and Mujahideen Uniforms, Clothing, and Equipment in the Soviet–Afghan War, 1979–1989* and *Salaam Bacha: Soviet and Mujahideen Small Arms and Light Weapons in the Soviet–Afghan War, 1979–1989*; Joseph Revesz Ehrlich, author of *Quench Warfare: Cocktails from the Soviet–Afghan War*; Rodric Braithwaite, author of *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan, 1979–1989*; Elizabeth Leake, author of *Afghan Crucible: The Soviet Invasion and the Making of Modern Afghanistan*; Gregory Fremont-

<sup>1</sup> <https://bookauthority.org/books/best-soviet-afghan-war-books>

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Barnes, author of *The Soviet–Afghan War 1979–89 (Essential Histories)*; Anthony Tucker-Jones, author of *The Soviet–Afghan War (Images of War)*; Mark S. Keren, author of *The Soviet–Afghan War: Another Look*; Olivier Roy, author of *Lessons of the Soviet/Afghan War*; and Reagan Funker, author of *The Holy Warrior: Osama Bin Laden and His Jihadi Journey in the Soviet–Afghan War (World History)*. In all of these works, the conflict is identified as the “Soviet–Afghan War.”

It is noteworthy that, during the course of this research, it became evident that a number of Western and other foreign authors have also employed the term “The Soviet War in Afghanistan” when referring to the conflict. Examples include Gregory Feifer’s *The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan*; Gary Jeffrey’s *The Soviet War in Afghanistan (Graphic Modern History: Cold War Conflicts)*; and Ilya Milyukov’s *The Soviet War in Afghanistan 1979–1989: An Infamous Military Intervention, 1979–1988*.

Furthermore, some political scientists and commentators have drawn parallels between the Afghan conflict and the Vietnam War, characterizing it as the “Soviet Union’s Vietnam” or “the Soviet Vietnam.” This comparison is generally based on the prolonged nature of the conflict, the challenges faced by Soviet forces in combating insurgent groups, the substantial human and economic costs incurred by the Soviet Union, and the broader geopolitical consequences that followed the intervention[2].

However, it should be noted that, in contrast to the experience of the United States in Vietnam, the Soviet Union achieved a number of its immediate military objectives in Afghanistan. Therefore, direct comparisons between the two conflicts should be approached with caution.

The tendency among Western scholars to refer to the conflict as the “Soviet–Afghan War” can largely be explained by the political and ideological context of the Cold War. Within Western political discourse, the deployment of Soviet troops into Afghanistan on 27 December 1979 was widely interpreted as a serious

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violation of international law and sovereignty. It was frequently characterized as an “invasion,” “occupation,” or “military intervention,” and was viewed as an unacceptable intrusion into the internal affairs of an independent state. Consequently, the conflict came to be framed as a war initiated and conducted by the Soviet Union against Afghanistan. This interpretation was further reinforced by the broader geopolitical rivalry between the Soviet Union and the Western bloc during the Cold War era.

Moreover, Zbigniew Brzezinski, National Security Advisor to U.S. President Jimmy Carter, argued that the Soviet intervention reflected “Moscow’s age-old dream of direct access to the Indian Ocean.” Such assessments significantly influenced Western perceptions of the conflict and contributed to the widespread adoption of the term “Soviet–Afghan War” in Western historiography and political discourse[3].

Among the numerous directives and regulations adopted during this period, particular attention should be paid to those governing the coverage of Soviet actions in Afghanistan by the press and other mass media outlets. According to these regulations, the reality of the “Afghan War” remained concealed from Soviet society for a considerable period. The extensive secrecy surrounding Soviet activities in Afghanistan generated public suspicion and skepticism, while also causing significant damage to the international reputation of the Soviet Union.

It is therefore appropriate to highlight several authors who have advanced this second historiographical approach and to examine their works. Among them are Yelena Grishina (*S nami angely ryadom shagali*), Vladimir Snegirev and Valeriy Samunin (*Smertonosnyy virus “A”. Kto “zarazil” SSSR Afganskoy voynoy*), Nikolay Fedorovich Ivanov (*Operatsiyu “Shtorm” nachat ran’she...*), Oleg Krivopalov (*Political Workers of the 40th Combined Arms Army in Afghanistan, 1979–1989*), Aleksandr Lyakhovskiy (*The Tragedy and Valor of Afghanistan; Secrets of the Afghan War*), Vladimir Mikhailovich Toporkov (*Soviet–Afghan*

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Relations in 1975–1991: Historical Experience in the Development and Implementation of the USSR’s Military-Political Strategy), V.N. Plastun (The Hidden Side of the Afghan War, 1979–1989), Artush Harutyunyan (In the Mountains of Badakhshan), Makhmut Gareev (The Afghan Ordeal), Boris V. Gromov (Limited Contingent: Soviet Troops in Afghanistan), V.G. Korgun (Afghanistan and Iran; Afghanistan: War and the Problems of Peace), S. Akimbekov (History of Afghanistan), Abdurashid Nurmurodov (Bloody Swaddles), Rofe Paradaev (Afghan Assignment), and O’tkir Abdurahimov (Games of Fate). In these works, the conflict is generally referred to as the “Afghan War,” and their analyses are conducted within this conceptual framework.

Against the backdrop of the deepening crisis in Afghanistan, the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) adopted a decision on 12 December 1979 to deploy a Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces (LCSF) to Afghanistan in order to provide “international assistance to the friendly Afghan people” and to create favorable conditions for preventing potential anti-Afghan actions by neighboring states. Prior to the adoption of this political decision, however, the leadership of the Soviet Ministry of Defense and the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the USSR had generally maintained that the introduction of Soviet troops into Afghanistan was inadvisable.

The deployment of Soviet forces to the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) began on 25 December 1979. By mid-January 1980, the main forces of the Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces had been stationed at their designated locations throughout Afghanistan. The period during which the principal Soviet military units were introduced, deployed in garrisons, and tasked with securing deployment areas and key facilities is generally regarded as the first stage of the Soviet military presence in Afghanistan (December 1979 – February 1980).

The entry of Soviet troops into Afghanistan, and particularly the forcible replacement of Hafizullah Amin with Babrak Karmal—a political leader

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considered by Moscow to hold more moderate views and whose rise to power was carried out with the active involvement of the Soviet side—further destabilized the political and security situation in Afghanistan.

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The entry of Soviet troops into Afghanistan, and particularly the forcible replacement of Hafizullah Amin with Babrak Karmal—a political leader considered by Moscow to hold more moderate views and whose rise to power was carried out with the active involvement of the Soviet side—further destabilized the political and security situation in Afghanistan.

The opposition forces intensified their propaganda activities, calling upon the population to wage a “holy war” (jihad) against the government and its Soviet supporters. At the same time, assistance provided to opposition groups by foreign states increased significantly, further contributing to the escalation of the conflict. The composition of the Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces in Afghanistan (LCSF), known in Russian sources as the Limited Contingent of Soviet Troops

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in Afghanistan (OKSVA), was not static and underwent continuous changes throughout the conflict. By early February 1980, the Soviet military presence in the territory of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) consisted primarily of the 40th Army, two motorized rifle divisions, one airborne division, an air assault brigade, two separate regiments, and a number of supporting military units and formations.

During the first half of 1981, the Soviet military grouping in Afghanistan was further reinforced through the deployment of an additional motorized rifle division and two separate regiments. These measures reflected the growing scale of the conflict and the increasing involvement of Soviet forces in efforts to stabilize the military and political situation within the country[4].

In Vietnam, the United States deployed a military contingent approximately five times larger than the Soviet 40th Army in a territory that was nearly five times smaller than Afghanistan. This comparison is frequently cited to illustrate the distinct geographical and operational challenges faced by Soviet forces during the Afghan conflict.

According to Boris Gromov, the primary mission of the 40th Army in the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) was to create favorable conditions for the functioning of the legitimate government of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). Reflecting on the Soviet military presence in Afghanistan, Gromov argued that assessments of the conflict based solely on the dichotomy of “victory” or “defeat” fail to capture the complex nature of counterinsurgency warfare. As he stated, “Those who view the outcome of the war exclusively through the prism of victory or defeat do not fully understand the complex character of military operations against guerrilla forces. I am convinced that Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan successfully fulfilled the tasks assigned to them.”

This perspective reflects an interpretation common among a number of former Soviet military officials, who maintain that the Soviet armed forces largely

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accomplished their operational and tactical objectives, regardless of the broader political consequences of the intervention[5].

In conclusion, the military conflict that took place in Afghanistan between 1979 and 1989 emerged as a result of a complex interplay of internal and external factors, and its causes, development, and consequences cannot be explained from a single perspective. Although this issue has been extensively examined in the historiography of foreign and Russian scholars, many of these studies reflect particular political, ideological, or methodological biases, often resulting in one-sided interpretations of the conflict. The analysis conducted in this study demonstrates that different historiographical traditions have employed varying conceptual frameworks and terminology when interpreting the Afghan War, reflecting broader political and intellectual contexts. As a result, significant differences remain in the assessment of the origins, nature, and outcomes of the conflict. Therefore, an objective and comprehensive study of the Afghan War and the circumstances surrounding its emergence remains an important and relevant task for both international and Uzbek researchers. Further scholarly investigations based on a broad range of sources and diverse methodological approaches are essential for achieving a more balanced and nuanced understanding of this significant historical event.

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