

ans of the war that ended seventy years ago, instead of with the living veterans of the Afghan and Chechen wars. Danilova also effectively shows the ways in which the private commemorations of the families of Afghan and Chechen war dead simultaneously challenge and support the current government. While on the one hand, the relatives, most notably led by committees of soldiers' mothers, confront the authorities and demand recognition for the sacrifice of their sons, this "patriotism of despair" as Serguei Oushakine calls it, seeks for the lost and unrecognized soldiers to be incorporated into the national narrative, thus upholding the nation. Yet, here too, it is important to underline, perhaps even more than Danilova does, that despite the growing overall ideological consent to the militarization of the Russian nation, if draft dodging and passive resistance to cooperation with the military persist, this consent will not translate into effective military action or state legitimacy.

The Politics of War Commemoration is a timely book that demonstrates the ways in which modern states use the commemoration of the war dead to promote and support messy, ambiguous, and conflict-ridden military campaigns. Yet, as the American example of anti-Vietnam protest and the Soviet example of the collapse of support for the war in Afghanistan in the mid-1980s show, what seems to be a powerful pro-war consensus can sometimes collapse under the weight of new political circumstances and social formations. Danilova's outstanding work allows us to see the building blocks of military ideology at work as they are arranged and rearranged by states and social forces to build (or destroy) consensus.

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Rodric Braithwaite, *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan 1979-89*
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 417 pp.

"In Afghanistan", recalls Ruslan Aushev, a former Soviet officer in Afghanistan, "we did not have the task, as many say, of defeating

anybody. The main task for us in Afghanistan was to secure. To secure the transport of goods, to protect communications, to help the Afghan army” (Larina *et al* 2014). Indeed, many studies have tried to analyze the tasks of the Soviet troops during their ten-year long presence in Afghanistan, to unravel the military and diplomatic implications of this conflict, which became the major combat mission of the Soviet forces after World War II. Among these publications we find the groundbreaking Russian account by Alexander Liakhovskii (1995), as well as the books by Gregory Feifer (2009) and Artemy Kalinovsky (2011). The causes and the long-term consequences of the war, however, still remain to be fully disclosed. Rodric Braithwaite, the former British Ambassador to Moscow between 1988 and 1992, has delivered one of the best English-language accounts of the war. His book, *Afgantsy*, benefits from the author’s acquaintance with Soviet diplomatic circles and stands out because it is based to a large extent on Russian sources. Among the Russian-language works he exploits are Liakhovskii’s *Tragediia i doblest’ Afgana* (1995), Varennikov’s *Nepovtorimoe* (2001), and Gai and Snegirev’s *Vtorzhenie. Neizvestnye stranitsy neob”iavlennoi voiny* (1990)—the latter in particular is a key source on which Braithwaite draws time and again.

This book is hence of interest for all scholars concerned with the Soviet war in Afghanistan and for a broader audience interested in this dramatic chapter of Cold War History. Braithwaite begins the first section of his book, “The Road to Kabul”, with a concise summary of Afghan history from the 17th century. He pays close attention to the country’s most recent history, following the overthrow of president Mohammed Daud in 1978. Two things emerge in these opening chapters: first, there was a long-standing diplomatic and economic interaction between the USSR and Afghanistan well before the Soviet military machine was set in motion. The intervention can only be grasped against the backdrop of these intense relations and of the presence of hundreds of Soviet technical advisers working in Afghanistan prior to the intervention. Second, the Soviet leadership was extremely reluctant to dispatch troops. However, it is a rather superficial preliminary conclusion to say that the Soviet Union “slithered towards military intervention because they could not

think of a better alternative” (p. 57), or because they were driven by emotions (p. 74). The first section of the book closes with a highly interesting account of dissenting voices within the USSR. While there were also debates at the Politburo level, it cannot be stressed enough that the Soviet Union, even under Brezhnev, was anything but a unitary, monolithic political entity. There was dissent, there were doubts, and, at least in part, these could also be voiced. The Academy of Sciences, for example, repeatedly raised concerns about sending Soviet soldiers (whom Braithwaite consistently calls “the Russians”) to Afghanistan.

The 125-page long central section of the book is devoted to the “Disasters of the War”. It gives an account of the conflict from the creation of the 40th Army to its downfall. The 40th army is the true protagonist of this book: Braithwaite skillfully retells the drama of this unit and its individual soldiers, arguing that their fate was sealed from the very beginning. The Soviet troops were neither materially nor psychologically equipped for the war to come. Prepared for a conventional conflict on the battlefields of Europe, the Red Army had to fight a counter-insurgency war. However, either the Soviet troops continued to apply the conventional war framework on Afghanistan, or they adhered to the belief that their task was basically a peaceful one: Braithwaite, echoing Ruslan Aushev, claims that this task was not to occupy the country but “to secure the towns and the road between them” (p. 123) and to protect a socialist revolution from outside interference (p. 126).

The Soviet war in Afghanistan was a counterinsurgency war, “a war without fronts” (p. 230). Thus, the numbers of battles won did not determine the outcome of the war. It was a complex affair of military and political factors, both domestic and international. Braithwaite successfully tackles the former issues and discusses the “four distinct phases” of the war that are “usually” distinguished (p. 139). Braithwaite contradicts Liakhovskii’s overall negative picture of the 40th army, underscoring that at least in part it succeed in adapting. However, it would be worthwhile to pursue further research to buttress this claim. Chapter Seven, *The Nation Builder*, is probably one of the most interesting sections of the whole book, because it looks beyond the pure military issues of the war. In many

telling anecdotes drawn from Russian literature, Braithwaite presents the role of soldiers, advisers, and women, and discusses their day-to-day routines in the cities and in the countryside. However, the book provides neither a systematic account of the massive financial side of the Soviet nation building effort, a task better fulfilled, for example, by Robinson and Dixon (2013), nor a discussion of the cultural policies pursued by the USSR in Afghanistan. The author also looks at the activities of soldiers beyond the battlefield and off-duty (pp. 188ff) and even to their artistic production. This section confirms that certain claims about the war were Western myths. These include for example the fighting morale of Central Asian soldiers (p. 121), the impact of American Stingers (p. 205), or the Soviet toy-like mines (p. 235).

The final section of the book deals with the retreat of the Soviet troops from Afghanistan. It is in this section that the author assumes a more political point of view (esp. on pp. 272–82), highlighting the political process initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev after he took power. Gorbachev wanted to get out of Afghanistan as quickly as possible. Still, he wanted to do so in an orderly manner, that is, with a regime in place that could hang on with Soviet material assistance but without Soviet troops. Gorbachev and his Foreign Ministry were also concerned about the USSR's reputation in the Third World in the event of an overly sudden Soviet retreat. Mohammed Najibullah was the Kremlin's pick to reach out to all warring parties and initiate a process of reconciliation. The issue of "building socialism", however, became a completely secondary task (p. 273). Braithwaite is at his best when he combines the political history of the decision to retreat taken at the top echelons of the Soviet state (ch. 12) with stories from the ground, showing how soldiers experienced their departure (also ch. 11). Finally, *Afgantsy* takes a look at the period after the Soviet withdrawal, both in Russia and in Afghanistan. To the surprise of many observers, Najibullah's government survived until 1992, when the collapse of the USSR resulted in an end to financial and material support. The Kremlin's new ruler, Boris Yeltsin, cut all aid to Afghanistan's central government and started dealing with Ahmad Shah Masud and General Dostum's Northern Alliance. Kabul fell to the Taliban in September 1996. For the veterans of the

war, the return home meant a protracted process of adaptation to civilian life in countries traumatized by the collapse of the Soviet empire and with shattered economies. In most former Soviet republics, veterans had to struggle for recognition.

Rodric Braithwaite has produced a highly interesting, accessible and instructive book that is empirically rich and well written. The author discloses an impressive level of detail on a range of aspects of the Soviet war in Afghanistan, from the role of women to soldiers' exact wages. His extensive use of Russian sources is a strong point of the book, but in some respects it also determines the book's weaker sides. It is conducive to Braithwaite's aims because it unravels many particulars of the war previously unknown to the English-language reader. The book's appeal derives first and foremost from the individual stories and dramas it retells, from Colonel Sidorov who sacrificed his life to save that of his comrades in arms (p. 211), or from Nikolai Bystrov, the POW turned Masud's bodyguard (p. 263). However, this approach can be disadvantageous: the story built around these individual experiences is prone to take over the Soviet perspective and to romanticize the soldiers' experiences, losing sight of the big (political) picture. Too often the book indulges in the veterans' memories, retelling the story of the war from the perpetrators' perspective, without questioning their accounts. Is this the lesson *Afgantsy* tries to teach: that there are no perpetrators and no victims in a counterinsurgency war? Braithwaite often abstains both from moral judgments and from political analysis. For example, he delivers little hints as to why the USSR was drawn into the quagmire of this war. Westad (2007), in contrast, has advanced an interesting argument that Third World regimes often successfully managed to push the super-powers into certain policies by threatening to switch sides. Focusing entirely on the Soviet soldiers' perspective as this work does, it also comes as no surprise that the Afghan view on the conflict is completely absent. The Afghans did not matter to the Soviet soldiers—they barely appear in the soldiers' accounts, and hence they evidently matter little to the author of this book, too. Bringing in an Afghan or even a post-colonial perspective is not Braithwaite's aim, just as it has not been the aim of Liakhovskii

(1995) or Feifer (2009): these books retell the Soviet soldiers' experiences, and they do this very well. Accordingly, when the Afghan population is mentioned at all, it appears rather monochromatic. Braithwaite puts much stress on the alleged religiosity of the population (which has become a cliché when discussing Afghanistan) and sees the "religious factor" as cause and determinant for their actions (pp. 48, 122, 123). Braithwaite claims that the population was "not ripe for socialism" (p. 48) or that it had no interest in the fruits of modernity that the USSR allegedly offered the country, that they preferred "their own ways" (p. 123). These statements put undue weight on religion and do not reflect the complexity of Afghan society and of the international context in which they were located. Again, Braithwaite takes over the Soviet view on the war while, and, with a pinch of orientalism, he implies that Afghanistan is stuck in backwardness. Religion certainly was a mobilizing force but it is safe to say that it was not the only factor that drove resistance. Other key reasons for resistance were that the fruit of modernity was poisoned—that it came along with a high degree of structural, episodic, and bluntly physical violence exercised by the country's "socialist" leadership and by the Soviet occupiers. Afghanistan was a *Gewaltraum*, in which, however, the state, supported by Soviet troops, became a primary source of violence. Finally, Braithwaite, at times, seems to put the violence exercised by the invaders and the resistance on the same level (pp. 123, 232-234), disregarding the fact that, as Frantz Fanon famously argued in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), violence might be the only appropriate answer to colonialism. Parallels to the Western war in Afghanistan since 2001 are scarce (pp. 181, 304, 227, 236). There are more comparisons to the British experience (pp. 129-31), however, all these comparisons remain unsystematic. The scholarly value of this book lies first and foremost in having incorporated a wide array of sources, especially, Russian ones. Researchers analyzing events during the Soviet presence in Afghanistan will greatly benefit from the detailed bibliography. However, the book is widely lacking in a hypothesis to be tested, or an argument to be advanced. Indeed, there is no proper "conclusion", but rather an "epilogue" and technical "annexes".

Hence, Braithwaite keeps his promise: he puts the veterans, the *Afgantsy*, and their memories at the center of his work, leaving aside a political and economic analysis of the conflict. The book is an excellent, well-sourced English-language chronicle of the war in Afghanistan and most certainly a highly delectable read. It is an indispensable companion for any future work on the Soviet war in Afghanistan.

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E. S. Seniavskaia, *Istoriia voin Rossii XX veka v chelovecheskom izmerenii: problemy voenno-istoricheskoi antropologii i psikhologii. Kurs lektsii*. Moscow: RGGU, 2012. 332 pp.

This work reviewed here is a textbook for tertiary level students, and this genre naturally imposes its own specificities on the presentation of the material. We do not have the right to expect wide discussion or deep immersion in bibliographical sources here; students expect unambiguous definitions and clear disciplinary boundaries. But this book does provide a sound basic introduction to the author's concept of military-historical anthropology.

The author of this book, Elena Seniavskaia, is a renowned Russian historian, professor, and leading researcher at the Institute of Russian History in the Russian Academy of Sciences. Her areas of