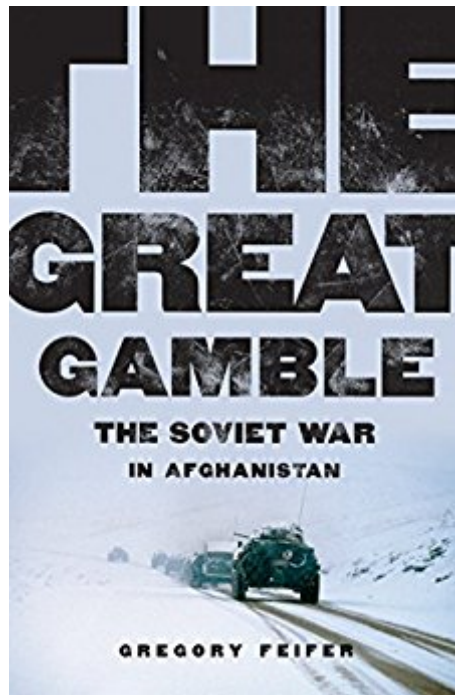




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# The Great Gamble: The Soviet War In Afghanistan



## Synopsis

“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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In "The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan", former NPR Moscow correspondent Gregory Feifer covers the 1979-1989 Soviet-Afghan war, primarily from the Soviet side, although with some input from the Afghan side. In short, it shows how the Soviets got involved in a war it probably had no business being in, and how they discovered it was much easier getting into

Afghanistan than it was to get out. Feifer begins with a brief description and overview of Afghanistan, and how, over its long history, no country has ever conquered it. He then pieces together, as best he can, how the Soviet Union made the decision to invade Afghanistan (the principals did not leave any written record on how the decision was arrived at). Feifer then discusses the invasion and execution of the Afghan Prime Minister in detail. The ensuing fighting between the Soviets (and their Afghan allies) on the one side, and the various tribes and factions that made up the Mujahdeen on the other, take up most of the rest of the book. The author concludes with some analysis and aftermaths of the war. Feifer, while living in Moscow, was able to draw on Russian-language histories not available in English, and interview many participants of the war, both relatively important leaders as well as "grunts" on the ground (and in the air), and include their stories into the overall narrative. This is much more a "popular" style of history, instead of an "X's" and "O's" discussion of strategy and battles. The author also draws many analogies between the Soviet-Afghan war and the ongoing war led by the United States. There is a relative lack of studies on the Soviet war in Afghanistan in English, so this book is a welcome addition. I learned a great deal about the war from this book. For example, I was amazed at how poorly the average Soviet soldier was supplied and fed, and how that directly led to looting and murders of the local Afghans, which in turn hardened them against the Soviets. While this is not the definitive book about this war (nor, I believe, does it intend to be), it's good effort and well worth your time. Four stars. Kindle edition reviewed.

The below is a review of the audiobook, not the hardcopy. This is an overview of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as told by a Russian journalist, Gregory Fiefer. Mr. Fiefer's tale encompasses both low level activities such as actual experiences of combat troops as well as high level decisions made by senior decision makers. Examples of high level decisions include Brezhnev's decision (along with the Politburo of the time). Fiefer points out how many high level military officials, along with complacent officials in the field, conspired to present the Politburo (and especially Brezhnev) with a very rosy view regarding the benefits of an invasion (thus prompting a decision to invade) along with biased reports of the early stages of the war showing how "well" it was going. This pretty much locked the Soviet Union into pursuing the war for many years. In this reviewer's opinion, however, many of the high level decisions regarding the war seem to be based more on conjecture than actual facts based on either documents or interviews with high level decision makers (or at least of the ones who are still alive after all these years). This is a particular weakness of the book. This reviewer, for a high level analysis of the Soviet invasion, does not recommend this book. He

instead recommends "Afgansty: The Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-1989", a book written by a British ex-ambassador to the Soviet Union and currently an academic and chairman of the International Advisory Council of the Moscow School of Political Studies. Although, not surprisingly, quite academic that book does a far better job at examining the war from a high level. Where Mr. Feifer's book really shines, and where most of it concentrates, is on low level actions with respect to military combat, counter-insurgency and the running of the war on a day to day basis. One sees combat through the eyes of many relatively low level troops and officers who were in the field. One sees how vicious the war was. There was no shortage of brutal actions resulting from reprisals or strategies that were considered necessary to win the war (i.e., complete destruction of villages to prevent them from providing support to guerillas, etc.). The book, as a result of this examination of the war at the field level and the perspective of troops on the ground, shows the difficulties faced by the troops as well as how much the Soviet experience differed, as a result, from that of Western troops during the decade of the 2000s. Soviet logistics, for example, were atrocious and strewn with theft and corruption. As a result Soviet troops rarely received many of the essentials that were needed (i.e., warm clothing and adequate food). This had the effect of making the front line troops much "harder" than they needed to be (i.e., translating to more battlefield atrocities). It also had the effect of forcing them to steal quite a bit, thus worsening their relations with the populace. The typical soldier was not paid or supplied enough to even keep himself fed. Not that theft would not have constituted a serious problem considering the fact that even a country as poor as Afghanistan was relatively rich in consumer goods in very short supply in the Soviet Union. Many troops viewed their service as a way to enrich themselves. Thefts of products such as cassette players and motorcycles were more the norm than exception. In addition Soviet officers did not have, for lack of a better term, a decent rapport with the troops under their command. They were extremely callous in the treatment of their own troops (a tradition in the Russian armies from Tsarist times). It is not difficult to see why committing atrocities against the local Afghanistan population was too difficult. Considering the fact that US and Western troops still had serious problems in terms of losses and a poor relations with the Afgan population, despite having none of these problems, one sees how bad it must have been for the Soviets, in comparison. In short, a mediocre high level analysis of the war but relatively good analysis of the war closer to the front. The audiobook is very well read and never monotone. Very good for long trips.

I enjoyed reading the Soviet view of the war. The trials and errors, the brotherhood, and in some cases the lack of it. An interesting part was the goings on in the Soviet Union at the time. It sheds

some light on things. Mostly easy to read, but it did lose me due to the depth of the detail of the Afgans. I found it difficult to keep track of the names, but that was just me, as I did not have a lot of interest in that. Another reader would likely get a lot out of it. If you like recent military history, this will do well.

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