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### 'Graveyard of empires'

Hughes, R Gerald; Fergusson, James

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Review Article

## ‘Graveyard of Empires’: Geopolitics, war, and the tragedy of Afghanistan

James Fergusson and R. Gerald Hughes

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- *Directorate S: The CIA and America’s Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan, 2001-2016*, by Steve Coll (London: Penguin 2019), pp. 784, pbk, £12.99. ISBN: 9780718194499.
  - *War and State-Building in Afghanistan: Historical and Modern Perspectives*, ed. Scott Gates and Kaushik Roy (London: Bloomsbury Academic 2015), pp. 320, pbk, £31.99. ISBN: 9781474286350.
  - *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-89* by Rodric Braithwaite (London: Profile Books 2012), pp. xiv+418, pbk, £8.99. ISBN: 9781846680625.
  - *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan and Bin Laden, From the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*, by Steve Coll (London: Allen Lane 2005), pp. 736, pbk, £14.99. ISBN: 9780141020808.
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When you’re wounded and left on Afghanistan’s plains  
And the women come out to cut up what remains,  
Jest roll to your rifle and blow out your brains  
An’ go to your Gawd like a soldier.  
**Rudyard Kipling, ‘The Young British Soldier’, 1892<sup>1</sup>**

Financially it is ruinous. Morally it is wicked. Militarily it is an open question, and politically it is a blunder.  
**Winston S. Churchill on the second Anglo-Afghan War, 1898<sup>2</sup>**

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To those who favour a literary flourish in their historiography, Afghanistan has long been known as the ‘graveyard of empires’.<sup>3</sup> This reputation has quite some lineage given the long history of great power engagement with the strategically-located Afghanistan (in 2011 the British Museum in London ran an exhibition treasures entitled ‘Afghanistan: Crossroads of the Ancient World’).<sup>4</sup> It is undoubtedly a difficult territory over which to establish control, and its reputation induces pessimism in observers at the merest sign of trouble. Mythologies abound and those seeking to invoke ‘lessons of history’, enthusiastically relate stories of British and Soviet military disasters in the face of the hardy Afghan populace, forged into steeliness by centuries of struggle (rivalled only by warrior-nations like the Chechens or the Vietnamese). Dominant traditional narratives posit that Afghanistan has long been at the centre of the nexus comprising international politics, the Great Powers and Islam. And, indeed, Great Power interest in that state does seem to have a long history. After his defeat at the hands of the Afghans in 330 BC, Alexander the Great is said to have remarked that ‘Afghanistan is easy to march into but hard to march out of.’ Over a millennium later, a similarly frustrating experience was endured by the fearsome Genghis Khan in 1220.<sup>5</sup> That two of the greatest warrior princes

in history suffered such indignities is something that commentators have long favoured as an opening line in innumerable pieces of literary armchair strategy. (And, over the centuries, the myth of Afghan invincibility was reinforced as the greatest powers of their day – the Macedonians, the Mongols, the Mughals, the British, the Soviet Union and, most recently, the United States - found their might rendered impotent). In 2001 Milton Breaden asserted that ‘If anyone is to replace an emir in Afghanistan, it will have to be the people of Afghanistan themselves. Any doubters should ask the British and the Russians.’<sup>6</sup> More recently, Jonathan Steele reflected on the two most recent invaders thus: ‘When I look back now at the reports and analyses I wrote at the time, it’s impossible not to be struck by the similarity of Soviet policy to what the Bush and Obama administrations have been trying to achieve with their more recent interventions.’<sup>7</sup> That said, when writing about Afghanistan, in either the specific or the generality, it is important for scholars and commentators to interrogate what they might regard of omnipresent. Kaushik Roy is thus quite right when he notes that ‘Islam in general and jihad in particular are not always crucial components of Afghan opposition to external invaders in their homelands’.<sup>8</sup>

As with so many other interventions, the British invasion of 1839 was prompted by Great Power (in)security concerns. (In the spring of 1839, as the British invaded Afghanistan for the first time, some 20,000 British and East India Company troops poured through the high mountain passes and re-establishing Shah Shuja ul-Mulk on the throne). The Emir, Dost Mohammad, wary of his attempts to play the British off against his neighbours to the north, the Russians. Dost Mohammad was duly exiled to British India and replaced by his predecessor, Shah Shuja (who grew increasingly isolated and repressive means until he was assassinated in 1842).<sup>9</sup> The British experienced a disaster during their retreat at the end of this First Anglo-Afghan War (1839-1842). During their passage over the mountain passes outside Kabul 4,500 British soldiers and 12,500 civilians died. This colossal humiliation inflicted upon the then global hegemon, was memorably captured by Elizabeth Butler in her painting depicting Dr William Brydon - the sole survivor - reaching the British fort in Jalalabad on horseback. For many commentators, the savagery of the nature of insurgency in Afghanistan in the nineteenth century would have been only too familiar to their twenty-first century successors in the British army. In 2006 General David Richards, the British commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF),<sup>10</sup> stated that his forces engaged in the most ‘persistent, low-level dirty fighting’ undertaken by the British since the Korean War (1950-1953). Confirming this, a professor at the Royal Statistical Society declared that British soldiers in Afghanistan were precisely six times more likely to be killed than their comrades in Iraq.<sup>11</sup> Of course, geography is the one constant in international politics and, here at least, Afghanistan’s terrain makes it a difficult nut to crack. As an official British parliamentary research paper noted in 1997: ‘Afghanistan to the south and east of the Hindu Kush straddles an historic migration and invasion route between Central and South Asia. The mountains form a distinct physical barrier and the small number of passes have generally been easier to defend militarily than to capture’.<sup>12</sup> In such a vein, William Dalrymple recently identified certain parallels between contemporary Afghanistan and the war of 1839-1842: unresolved tribal rivalries; strikingly similar battles in familiar locations; garrisons of foreigners under threat in the same geographical hotspots. In one particularly resonant move in 1835, the then Emir of Afghanistan (Dost Mohammad Khan) called for *jihad* against the invaders – beginning with the Sikhs who were then in occupation of the provinces of Kandahar and Peshawar.<sup>13</sup>

In April 1978, the Afghan army, forcibly established the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, executed the ruling family, and installed the PDPA’s<sup>14</sup> Secretary General Nur Muhammad Taraki as President of the Revolutionary Council and Prime Minister.<sup>15</sup> Ten months later, a

serious diplomatic crisis occurred when the US to Afghanistan, Adolph Dubs, was kidnapped and murdered by persons unknown. (These were variously identified as leftists (specifically, the Marxist *Settam-e-Melli* ('National Oppression'), and as Islamists.<sup>16</sup> Dubs was killed in a failed rescue attempt by government forces and this further soured US-Soviet relations generally and over Afghanistan in particular just as the era of détente was slowly ending and political Islam was rising. Documents released long after the fall of the Soviet Union reveal how politicised intelligence from Afghanistan severely curtailed Moscow's policy choices in that country<sup>17</sup> (in a manner that one might, once again, invoke a comparison with the case of the US intervention in Vietnam). Of course, the fall of the Shah, a staunch ally of the West, and the creation of the hostile theocracy that is the Islamic Republic of Iran, stimulated fears that the US would intervene against the Mullahs. Moscow also believed that the US might seek to involve itself in Afghanistan in order to obtain a 'substitute' regional ally.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Cold War paranoia was such that the Soviet Union even fretted that Afghan strongman Hafizullah Amin was a CIA agent!<sup>19</sup> (Something the US government was unaware of).<sup>20</sup> This whole Soviet intervention once again demonstrated how the Great Powers – in this case in the Cold War – under-estimated the motivating power of Islam (and Moscow was to struggle to secure Afghanistan with an army of 104,000).<sup>21</sup> Despite popular misconceptions, US involvement in Afghanistan actually preceded the Soviet invasion.<sup>22</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Jimmy Carter's hard-line National Security Adviser (1977-1981), stated at interview in 1998 that, while the Soviets army invaded Afghanistan on 24 December 1979, President Carter signed the first directive for secret aid to the opponents of the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul on 3 July 1979. 'And that very day, I wrote a note to the president in which I explained to him that in my opinion this aid was going to induce a Soviet military intervention.' The staunch anti-communist Brzezinski asserted that 'We didn't push the Russians to intervene [in Afghanistan], but we knowingly increased the probability that they would.' Predictably, the Cold Warrior had few regrets about his role stoking conflict.

That secret operation was an excellent idea. It had the effect of drawing the Russians into the Afghan trap and you want me to regret it? The day that the Soviets officially crossed the border, I wrote to President Carter. We now have the opportunity of giving to the USSR its Vietnam War. Indeed, for almost 10 years, Moscow had to carry on a war unsupportable by the government, a conflict that brought about the demoralization and finally the breakup of the Soviet empire.<sup>23</sup>

While some historians<sup>24</sup> support the notion that the US national security state was able to trick the Soviets into invading Afghanistan, others are more sceptical.<sup>25</sup> John Ehrman noted in *Studies in Intelligence*, the CIA's in-house journal, that 'This is a claim ... based on a remark made by Zbigniew Brzezinski in an interview 20 years after the fact [in 1998] and for which there appears to be no documentary or other substantiation. While anyone writing on Soviet intelligence needs to be aware of the reality of conspiracies and bizarre plots, this claim seems to go a little far.'<sup>26</sup> Even then the debate may well be moot. In 1990 Artyom Borovik, a prominent Russian journalist and media magnate, perceptively opined that 'Even if all the secret documents connected with the Soviet Union's decision to invade Afghanistan were made public tomorrow, I doubt that they would shed much light on the truth; quite possibly they might just add to the confusion'.<sup>27</sup> In *Ghost Wars*, Steve Coll downplayed the importance of the CIA operation in Afghanistan and cited declassified documents demonstrating Brzezinski's fears about the Soviet invasion, 'show[ing] no hint of satisfaction' about the turn of events.<sup>28</sup> (Although Brzezinski's 1983 memoir gives the exact opposite impression).<sup>29</sup>

In 2012 Rodric Braithwaite, the last British ambassador to the Soviet Union (1988-92),<sup>30</sup> superbly charted the Soviet adventure in Afghanistan in his *Afghansty*. As the title states, he did this by focusing on the *Afghansty* – the word for Soviet veterans of the war. This highly original – and very human – volume deserves comparison with the very best writing on the experience of the American soldier in Vietnam. Braithwaite notes that, after an anniversary service at the Kremlin in 2009, that the veterans could at last feel that their sufferings were being recognised, ‘even if the state for which they fought no longer existed.’<sup>31</sup>

For the USSR in Afghanistan, as well as the USA in Iran, the period from 1978 is instructive in how both Superpowers tried to ignore the rise of political Islam whenever possible. In truth, in both Moscow and Washington, Islam was neither convenient in ideological terms nor a priority in policy terms. Documents now available indicate that the leadership of the USSR failed inasmuch as it relied excessively on pessimistic KGB assessments prior to deciding to invade in December 1979.<sup>32</sup> During his tenure as British ambassador to Afghanistan, Sherard Cowper-Coles recalled that Zamir Kabulov, his Russian counterpart, often jokingly declared that his length of service there had caused a city to be named for him. As with many of his compatriots, he seemed ambiguous in his attitude as to whether, or not, he wanted the West to win, or lose, in Afghanistan. For although the latter course seemed to portend regional chaos and destabilisation, the idea that the West might be able to prevail where the mighty Red Army had failed. Small wonder that Kabulov would tell Cowper-Coles that ‘I have a very warm feeling towards you, [as] I see you making all the same mistakes as we did.’<sup>33</sup> Braithwaite dissents from this view somewhat and avoids hackneyed comparisons with the past. In fact, for all the dramatic accidents of geography and history, there are number of distinctions between Russia and Britain in the nineteenth century and their Soviet and Western successor interventionists in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Even so, Braithwaite asserts that ‘It took the Russians two hundred and fifty years to get to Kabul. The British started later, but got there sooner. Both were driven by the same imperial logic.’ This was articulated by the Russian Foreign Minister, Prince Gorchakov (1789–1883), in 1864.

The position of Russia in Central Asia is that of all civilised states which are brought into contact with half-savage nomad populations possessing no fixed social organisation. In such cases it always happens that the more civilised state is forced, in the interests of the security of its frontiers and its commercial relations, to exercise a certain ascendancy over those whose turbulent and unsettled character makes them undesirable neighbours.<sup>34</sup>

Braithwaite’s book addresses a number of myths about the Soviets’ war in Afghanistan. These include the notion that the Stinger anti-aircraft missiles supplied by the US led to Moscow’s decision to withdraw.<sup>35</sup> When the Soviets reported their losses in war (between 1979 and 1989) as being relatively low, at 114 fixed-wing aircraft and 332 helicopters,<sup>36</sup> it seems they were not lying. Indeed, the idea that the Soviets fought an unimaginative and inflexible counterinsurgency in Afghanistan<sup>37</sup> is not sustainable. The myth that the war led to the collapse of the USSR in 1991 (a dissolution rooted in the history and the structures of the Soviet state) is also dispelled in *Afghansty*. Indeed, in 1979 Braithwaite himself wrote a briefing on the USSR for the incoming Thatcher government which stated ‘that the Soviet Union was a military giant but an economic and political pygmy.’ Alas, he notes, ‘my superiors regarded [this] as complacent so it was changed.’<sup>38</sup> In time Braithwaite was proved right – as an official British report duly noted in 1997: ‘At that time [when the USSR invaded Afghanistan] the elderly Soviet leadership had no inkling of how close their economic and social system was to collapse and regarded the 1970s as a decade of successful global competition with the West in

general and the United States in particular.’<sup>39</sup> And yet, in truth, and contrary to the boasts of individuals such as Osama bin Laden,<sup>40</sup> the Red army was never defeated by the *Mujahedeen* (a ragtag of groups lacking equipment, discipline, cohesion and coordination). Indeed, some Afghan commanders who have faced both Soviet and US troops, rate the Soviets more highly. And the Soviet soldiers, often drawn from ordinary backgrounds themselves, are said generally to have got on better with the Afghans than their American counterparts. The civilian Soviet administration in Afghanistan can also be credited with a large building programme of schools, hospitals and housing (although, as with the USA in Vietnam, that hardly compensates for the brutality of the occupiers).<sup>41</sup> Ultimately, it was estimated that 300,000 Soviet troops would be needed to pacify Afghanistan, entailing expenditure that was economically and politically impossible. Given this, even more than was the case with the US in Vietnam, the Soviet Union had little choice but to disengage.

Despite the long history of foreign entanglements with Afghanistan, it remains a place that outsiders struggle to understand at first contact. For many correspondents, including one of the present authors, struggling to make sense of NATO’s campaign against the Taliban in southern Afghanistan from 2006, Steve Coll’s *Ghost Wars*, published in 2004, was a kind of Bible. The principal justification of that war was that the Taliban had harboured Bin Laden, providing a sanctuary from which he organised the attacks of 9/11; and that this could happen again if the Taliban were not ‘disrupted, degraded and defeated,’ in the military parlance of the day. Yet the relationship between the Afghans and their Arab ‘guests’ was never so simple, and nor was America’s relationship with the jihadists. Coll’s Pulitzer Prize-winning thesis, now the accepted orthodoxy but not nearly so obvious at the time, was that the Islamist movement in Afghanistan-Pakistan was literally an American creation. Washington ideologues in the Reagan years, with assistance on the ground from the CIA, were so determined to win their proxy war against the Soviets that they ignored the risks of what they were fostering. Any enemy of our enemy is our friend, was their mantra: an ethically tangled policy whose legacy is still felt. The rise not just of the Taliban but Al Qaida, ISIS, the disasters of Iraq and Syria - all have their origins in the hot Afghan endgame of the Cold War. For authority and detail, nothing comes close to Coll’s study of how this happened.

*Directorate S* is Steve Coll’s sequel to *Ghost Wars*, and it is no less impressive. The former managing editor of the *Washington Post*, as well as that paper’s former South Asia bureau chief, Coll’s access on both Capitol Hill and at the Pentagon is astonishing, and he makes full use of it. He covers the ground with unusual thoroughness: he was assisted in this opus by no fewer than four full-time researchers. It is, for sure, an America-centric book. Reading its pages, it is easy sometimes to forget that the thirteen-year long Operation Enduring Freedom was a genuinely international enterprise, pulling in a coalition of 59 nations, many of whom paid a very high price for their participation in blood, treasure, and terrorist blowback in their homelands.<sup>42</sup> But this is forgivable. The intervention was motivated by 9/11, and America led it and were the most heavily invested. It was always America that mattered most. As an expose of the workings of Washington, and the means by which Bush and then Obama reached their fateful decisions, *Directorate S* will likely never be beaten - and for a full understanding of how Britain and all the other allies were led into the Afghan mess, it is fundamental.

The title of Steve Coll’s recent book – *Directorate S* - refers to the most secretive section of the ISI, Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence agency, which was responsible for relations with the Taliban. Coll shows how that paradoxical relationship lies at the heart of the failure of the US Afghan mission. On one hand, Pakistan was America’s most critical ally in the war, the territory by which NATO’s vast military machine in land-locked Afghanistan was resupplied.

They shared some security goals, too. Despite Bin Laden's eventual location (and liquidation) on Pakistani soil, the ISI frequently co-operated with the CIA's hunt for Al Qaida operatives. They had no love either for the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a Taliban splinter group led by Baitullah Mehsud that emerged in 2007 in Waziristan in Pakistan's lawless North West Frontier Province. The TTP's fierce hostility to Islamabad was wholly different to that of their Afghan Talib parent organisation. Pakistan, however, also sees groups linked to Al Qaeda, such as TTP, as allies in its fight against India and as a way to exert influence against the US-backed government in Kabul.<sup>43</sup> In 2009 the TTP briefly threatened the existence of the Pakistani state, fighting pitched battles with the Pakistan Army for control of Swat, a district just 80 miles from the capital. On the other hand, the Taliban in Afghanistan enjoyed the support of the ISI. Despite Islamabad's protestations to the contrary, Mullah Omar's shura was based in the Pakistani city of Quetta. Taliban fighters were able to come and go across the border with impunity, sometimes even with the complicity of the Pakistani military, to rest and rearm themselves. Consecutive American generals warned that for as long as the border remained porous, the insurgency could never be contained, let alone defeated. And yet neither Bush nor Obama, despite the billions in aid and hardware granted to Islamabad, were ever able to get the Pakistanis to plug the dyke.

Most Afghans, certainly their mercurial president, Hamid Karzai, believe the Taliban were not just clients but the creation of the ISI. The motive was India, with whom Pakistan has fought four disastrous wars since Partition in 1947. According to this thinking, the installation of a friendly Pashtun regime in Kabul would offer the Pakistani Army 'strategic depth,' that is, an impenetrable region in which to withdraw in the event of an Indian land invasion. Hence the existence of Directorate S, a department dedicated to the promotion of this over-arching goal - and which ultimately, according to Coll's analysis, proved matchless masters of the long double game, who played all the world for fools, and won.

As the emergence of the TTP proved, the strategy carried immense risks. The battle with the TTP has cost Pakistan tens of thousands of military dead and wounded, as well as immense civilian suffering; and it is not over yet. Moreover, the loyalty of the Afghan Taliban, led by proud Pashtun tribesmen with a tradition longer than Islam of fierce independence, has never been certain. As they like to say in Afghanistan: 'When the ISI created the Taliban, they gave birth to a tiger. The question is, have they got that tiger by the head or by the tail?' Ashfaq Kayani, the Army Chief from 2007-2013 with whom the US leadership tried so hard to engage, and who emerges as a key figure in Coll's narrative, never resolved that conundrum. By 2012, US President Barack Obama was desperate for an honourable exit from the quagmire, and asked him to lean on their Taliban clients to come to the negotiating table: negotiation that came with the implicit promise of a power-sharing arrangement after the Americans had left. Yet Kayani replied that the ISI had 'contact but not control' over the Taliban, and that there was 'no way [he] could "deliver" the Taliban to some sort of grand peace bargain.'<sup>44</sup>

Seven years on from 2012, that peace bargain seems as elusive as ever. The Taliban remain rampant. The establishment in 2015 of a branch of ISIS on Afghan soil only added to the nation's volatility.<sup>45</sup> In February 2018, President Ashraf Ghani offered the Taliban peace talks 'without preconditions,' but it is like listening to a scratch on a broken record. A negotiated peace has been official Afghan and American policy for a decade now. The violence continues: more than 10,000 civilians have been killed or injured every year since US combat operations ended in 2014.<sup>46</sup> The suicide bombing, meanwhile, is getting worse. More than a hundred civilians were killed in January in Kabul, where an explosives-laden ambulance blew up in crowds. 'How are we to live?' said a shopkeeper, Mohammad Hanif. 'Where should we go?

We have no security. We don't have a proper government. What should we do?' The Taliban, who claimed that bomb, are unrepentant. "The Islamic emirate has a clear message for Trump and his hand-kissers," a spokesman said. 'If you go ahead with a policy of aggression and speak from the barrel of a gun, don't expect Afghans to grow flowers in response.'<sup>47</sup>

The centrepiece of the US exit strategy was the ANA, the Afghan National Army, a force of 175,000 that was supposed to provide security for the political process as NATO left. Washington has spent over \$70 billion on training and funding Afghan security forces, and continues to commit over \$4 billion per year to that effort.<sup>48</sup> Yet this handover strategy didn't work for the Soviets in 1989. Why would it be any different this time? The 'embedded partnership' between NATO and the ANA was marred early on by a wave of 'green on blue' killings as Afghans trainees turned their weapons on their Western mentors.<sup>49</sup> Perhaps nothing is so evocative of the US's hubristic failure to understand the country it has tried so hard to help, nor so illustrative of the limits to American power. At the peak of the phenomenon in 2012, Coll reveals, 61 Coalition troops were murdered in this way, accounting for an astonishing 15 per cent of ISAF fatalities over the year<sup>50</sup> - a killing spree, he observes, without precedent in modern counterinsurgency. The Pentagon put the blue-on-green killings down to 'cultural incompatibility.' But as a study by the CIA psychiatrist Marc Sageman showed, the motivation for changing sides was less often about ideology than about group identification. American money was never going to buy true allegiance to a Western-democratized Afghan state, any more than it could buy the loyalty of the ISI over the border. Perhaps Rudyard Kipling, in his famous poem of 1889, was right after all when he observed, 'Oh, East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.'<sup>51</sup> In any event, the implications for American counterterrorism policy are clear. As Marc Sageman concludes, the escalation of violent conflict by the US will actually lead to an increase in terrorist activity.<sup>52</sup>

Is Afghanistan really the irreducible 'graveyard of empires' that cynics of Operation Enduring Freedom so often claim? Perhaps not. Yet reputations this potent, rooted as Afghanistan's is in a tradition dating back to Alexander the Great, have a way of fulfilling themselves. It certainly underpinned the ISI's dogged pursuit of strategic depth; and America's military failure there, privately predicted from the outset in Islamabad, has only augmented it. The epic sweep of Coll's two volumes is reflected in Scott Gates and Kaushik Roy's collection of essays, *War and State-Building in Afghanistan*, which seeks to draw lessons from the experiences of invaders of the past: the Mughals, the British, and the Soviets.<sup>53</sup> Gates and Roy's comparative historical perspectives are introduced with the following rationale (effectively pleading for the study of the 'lessons of history').

The Mughals, British and Soviets all failed to subjugate Afghanistan. These failures offer valuable lessons for today. While military technology has changed, the physical geography, social and cultural characteristics have not. These unchanging factors limit the extent to which war and state-building policies can be modified. This constancy over time makes the experiences of the past especially relevant for today.<sup>54</sup>

Roy himself argues convincingly argue for the very real achievements of the Mughals over two centuries (1520-1707). Indeed, they provided many salutary lessons for their successor interventionists in Afghanistan.<sup>55</sup> Perhaps the most intriguing contribution in *War and State-Building in Afghanistan* is from Ivan Arreguín-Toft, a Professor of International Relations at Boston University. He argues that the COIN effort was doomed from the start because Afghanistan is an 'imagined state' rather than a real one, and therefore lacks the 'critical mass'



of indigenous citizens desirous of a centrally governed community within it.<sup>56</sup> Elsewhere in the volume, John Ferris, a Professor at the University of Calgary, concludes his impressive piece with the observation that the British succeeded in Afghanistan only when three conditions coincided. First, when ‘it had something to offer’; second, when it was feared; third, when it found sufficient locals to cooperate.<sup>57</sup> In his piece Pavel K. Baev, a Professor at the Peace Research Institute in Oslo, asserts that a declining Soviet Union had ‘neither the Stalinist determination nor the Leninist ingenuity to’ achieve a ‘military solution’ to the problem of Afghanistan.<sup>58</sup> In sum, the range of historical sources and reflections on counter-insurgency experiences, with a special emphasis on geography and terrain ensure that represents a valuable contribution to the history of intervention and state-building in Afghanistan from 1520 to 2012. Regardless of the era under consideration, all of those who have served in Afghanistan would be able to relate to Braithwaite’s passionate chronicle of the experience of the Soviet soldier.

The soldiers who do the actual fighting come home having seen and done terrible things which return to haunt them. The stories of heroism and comradeship help them to manage their memories and give meaning to what they have been through. Some claim that the war years were the best of their lives. More say nothing, and go to their graves without even telling their nearest and dearest what it was really like.

So it is after all wars. So it was after the Soviet war in Afghanistan.<sup>59</sup>

Modern Afghanistan, as it is delineated on a map, is a strategic artifice, the creation not of Afghan nationalists but of British and Russian diplomats in the nineteenth century who sought a buffer state between their spheres of influence. As in Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo and other global trouble spots, the borders of Afghanistan are porous precisely because they are at best notional in the minds of the people who live there. The 1,500-mile Af-Pak border, notoriously, was drawn up in 1896 by the British colonial administrator Sir Mortimer Durand, who never bothered to consult the Pashtun tribes who have lived for millennia on either side. In 2017, even Hamid Karzai insisted that Afghanistan would ‘never recognise’ the Durand Line.<sup>60</sup> It is, Arreguín-Toft asserts, futile to try to rebuild a state that not even its West-appointed leader appeared to want. Rather than assuming that the International Community’s job is ‘to try put Humpty together again’, Arreguín-Toft argues, we should be asking a better set of questions: ‘What are the relative costs and benefits of rebuilding an Afghan state? Might there be a better (or at least less costly) way to preserve our citizens from terror... than a punitive, preventive or pre-emptive military intervention?’<sup>61</sup> One solution, he writes, is to create the conditions that lead to indigenous demand for a unitary state. In Afghanistan’s case that might mean redrawing the maps entirely, abolishing the Durand Line, perhaps even creating a new ethnic entity called Pashtunistan. But such an entity would in many places stretch as far into Pakistan as the River Indus, a territorial concession that no government in Islamabad could possibly contemplate.

Given the futility of the Afghan nation-building project, Arreguín-Toft opines that the vast sums the US has spent on trying to secure the country - some \$2 trillion since 2001<sup>62</sup> - might more usefully have been spent on improving homeland security. Yet, as he also acknowledges, such a course of action would have potentially huge consequences. ‘If the Taliban and their allies again take over Afghanistan,’ he writes, ‘it is possible that far from continuing to use Pakistan as a base area from which to manipulate Afghan politics, Afghanistan may become a base area for manipulating Pakistani politics. Given that Pakistan is known to possess nuclear weapons, this is a significant risk of ISAFs departure.’<sup>63</sup> Is it a risk that tomorrow’s empires -

India, say, or China - will willingly countenance? As a correspondent in 1998, one of the current authors was in Peshawar on the day the Islamabad government announced its first nuclear weapons, and was left in no doubt of the dangers this development posed.<sup>64</sup> There was wild jubilation in the streets; a snap newspaper poll found that 80 per cent of Pakistanis favoured a nuclear first strike against India in the event of a conventional land invasion from there. Whilst there is a great deal of the Afghan future that remains uncertain, Operation Enduring Freedom seems unlikely to be the last foreign intervention in this crucible of the world.

James Fergusson  
Author and foreign correspondent  
Edinburgh  
E-mail: jferg@blueyonder.co.uk

R. Gerald Hughes  
Centre for Intelligence and International Security Studies (CISS)  
Aberystwyth University  
E-mail: rbh@aber.ac.uk

**James Fergusson** is an award-winning author and foreign correspondent, specializing in Islamic affairs. His book on NATO's campaign in southern Afghanistan, *A Million Bullets* (2008), was the British Army's Military Book of the Year. A follow-up book, *Taliban* (2010), reappraised NATO's notorious enemy and argued the case for renewed Western dialogue with them. *The World's Most Dangerous Place* (2013), about Somalia, was short-listed for the Orwell Prize. His latest book, *Al-Britannia, My Country* (2017), which argues for a new approach to Britain's growing Muslim community, was described by former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams as 'a seriously necessary book.'

**R. Gerald Hughes** is Reader in Military History and Director of the Centre for Intelligence and International Security Studies at Aberystwyth University. Hughes is the reviews editor of *Intelligence & National Security*, the world's leading journal on the role of intelligence in international affairs, and is the former editor of the UK Study Group on Intelligence newsletter. His publications include *Germany and the Cold War: The Search for a European Détente, 1949-1967* (2007); *The Postwar Legacy of Appeasement: British Foreign Policy Since 1945* (2014); and, as editor, *The Cuban Missile Crisis: A Critical Reappraisal* (2016); and *Exploring Intelligence Archives: Enquiries into the Secret State* (2008). R. Gerald Hughes is a member of the *Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR)* and a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society (FRHistS).

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Matthew Bevis, 'Fighting Talk: Victorian War Poetry' in Tim Kendall (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> Churchill, letter to his mother, 1898. Quoted in Douglas S. Russell, *Winston Churchill: Soldier: The Military Life of a Gentleman at War*, foreword by Sir Martin Gilbert (London: Conway, 2005), p. 177.

<sup>3</sup> A moniker that remains popular. See, for example, Seth Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> The British Museum, 'Afghanistan: Crossroads of the Ancient World', 3 March-3 July 2011. [http://www.britishmuseum.org/about\\_us/news\\_and\\_press/press\\_releases/2010/afghanistan\\_exhibition.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/news_and_press/press_releases/2010/afghanistan_exhibition.aspx) (accessed 10 August 2018). 'The geographical position, overland connections and history ensured that it [i.e. the

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area of modern Afghanistan] was a region which enjoyed close relations with its neighbours in Central Asia, Iran, India and China, as well as more distant cultures stretching as far as the Mediterranean.’

<sup>5</sup> Musa Khan Jalalzai, *Whose Army? Afghanistan's Future and the Blueprint for Civil War* (Sanford, NC: Algora, 2014), p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> Milton Bearden, ‘Afghanistan, Graveyard of Empires’, *Foreign Affairs*, November/ December 2001; <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2001-11-01/afghanistan-graveyard-empires> (accessed 11 January 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Steele, ‘Afghan Ghosts: American Myths’, *World Affairs Journal* (2010), <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/afghan-ghosts-american-myths> (accessed 14 January 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Kaushik Roy, *War and Society in Afghanistan: From the Mughals to the Americans, 1500-2013* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 263.

<sup>9</sup> Edward Ingram, *In Defence of British India: Great Britain in the Middle East, 1775-1842* (London: Frank Cass, 1984), pp. 7-19.

<sup>10</sup> The (NATO) International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan was established by the United Nations Security Council in December 2001 by Resolution 1386. Richards commanded ISAF from May 2006 until February 2007. On NATO, ISAF and Afghanistan, see David P. Auerswald and Stephen M. Saideman, *NATO in Afghanistan: Fighting Together, Fighting Alone* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> James Fergusson, *A Million Bullets: The Real Story of the War in Afghanistan* (London: Bantam Press, 2008), p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Ware, International Affairs and Defence Section, House of Commons Library, *Afghanistan*, Research Paper 97/41, 25 March 1997, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> William Dalrymple, *Return of a King: The Battle for Afghanistan* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (*Hezb-e dimūkrātīk-e khalq-e Afghānistān*).

<sup>15</sup> Raymond L. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (Washington DC: The Brookings Institution, new ed. 1994), p. 986.

<sup>16</sup> Selig Harrison and Diego Cordovez, *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 34-5; William L. Harwood, ‘The Murder of Adolph Dubs’, *New York Times*, 28 December 2001.

<sup>17</sup> Odd Arne Westad, ‘Concerning the Situation in ‘A:’ New Russian Evidence on the Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan’, *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, 8/9 (1996/7), pp. 128-32.

<sup>18</sup> Christian Friedrich Ostermann, ‘New evidence on the war in Afghanistan: Introduction’, *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, 14/15 (2003-4), pp. 139-41.

<sup>19</sup> Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, p. 1046. Amin, having ordered the execution of Taraki, was General Secretary of the PDPA between September and December 1979. He was then murdered by the Soviets when they invaded in Operation Storm-333 on 27 December 1979. Rodric Braithwaite, *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-1989* (London: Profile Books, 2012), p. 94.

<sup>20</sup> Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin, 2004), p. 50.

<sup>21</sup> Fergusson, *A Million Bullets*, p. 254.

<sup>22</sup> As recalled by Robert Gates (Director of Central Intelligence (DCI), 1986-9) in his memoirs. Robert M. Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), pp. 143-49.

<sup>23</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski interview, ‘The CIA’s Intervention in Afghanistan’, *Le Nouvel Observateur* (Paris), 15-21 January 1998.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Jonathan Haslam, *Russia's Cold War: From the October Revolution to the Fall of the Wall* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 319; and Jonathan Haslam, *Near and Distant Neighbors: A New History of Soviet Intelligence* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), p. 245.

<sup>25</sup> R. Gerald Hughes and Arne Kislenko, ‘‘Fear Has Large Eyes’’: The History of Intelligence in the Soviet Union’, *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 30/4 (2017), p. 650.

<sup>26</sup> Ehrman, review of Haslam’s *Near and Distant Neighbors* in *Studies in Intelligence*, 60(1) (2016), <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol-60-no-1/near-and-distantneighbors.html> (accessed 24 August 2018). John Ehrman is an analyst in the CIA’s Directorate of Analysis.

<sup>27</sup> Artyom Borovik, *Hidden War: A Russian Journalist's Account of the Soviet War in Afghanistan* (New York: Grove Press, 1990), p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> Coll, *Ghost Wars*, pp. 50-1. Quote at 51.

<sup>29</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Advisor, 1977-1981* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983), p. 429.

<sup>30</sup> Since the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, for the last year of his tenure in Moscow he was ambassador to the Russian Federation.

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- <sup>31</sup> Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, p. 327.
- <sup>32</sup> Svetlana Savranskaya (ed.), 'The September 11th Sourcebooks: Volume II: Afghanistan: Lessons from the Last war: The Soviet experience in Afghanistan: Russian Document and Memoirs'. The National Security Archives, 9 October 2001. <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu//NSAEBB/NSAEBB57/soviet.html> (accessed 12 December 2018).
- <sup>33</sup> Sherard Cowper-Coles, review of Rodric Braithwaite, *Afgansty: The Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-1989*, *The Guardian* (London), 20 March 2011.
- <sup>34</sup> Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, p. 11.
- <sup>35</sup> In 2010 Jonathan Steele wrote that while the Stingers forced Soviet aircraft to operate at higher altitudes (and with less accuracy) the hit ratio of the US-supplied missiles was questionable. One US government report estimated that approximately 'one thousand Soviet and Afghan aircraft were destroyed by the end of 1986, mainly by Chinese heavy machine guns and other less sophisticated anti-aircraft weaponry, whereas during 1987, when Stingers were widely used, Soviet and Afghan aircraft losses did not exceed two hundred.' Steele, 'Afghan Ghosts'.
- <sup>36</sup> Peter Cooper, 'The Soviet Experience in Afghanistan, 1979-1989' in Helmut R. Hammerich, Uwe Hartmann and Claus von Rosen (eds), *Jahrbuch Innere Führung 2010: Die Grenzen des Militärischen* (Berlin: Carola Hartmann Miles – Verlag, 2010), p. 195.
- <sup>37</sup> As suggested by, for example, Kaushik Roy in his *War and Society in Afghanistan*, p. 169.
- <sup>38</sup> Sir Rodric Braithwaite, interview of 28 January 1998. Churchill College Cambridge: British Diplomatic Oral History Programme, p. 23. Braithwaite recalled that, in the late 1970s/early 1980s, as Thatcher and Reagan came to power, he viewed 'the Soviet menace [as being] very exaggerated'.
- <sup>39</sup> Ware, *Afghanistan*, p. 27.
- <sup>40</sup> In 1993 bin Laden told the British journalist Robert Fisk, in an interview conducted in Alamtig in the Sudan, that 'Personally neither I nor my brothers saw evidence of American help [in Afghanistan]. When my mujahedin were victorious and the Russians were driven out'. Robert Fisk, 'Anti-Soviet warrior puts his army on the road to peace: the Saudi businessman who recruited Mujahedin now uses them for large-scale building projects in Sudan', *The Independent* (London), 6 December 1993.
- <sup>41</sup> Cooper, 'The Soviet Experience in Afghanistan, 1979-1989', p. 178.
- <sup>42</sup> President Barack Obama announced the end of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan on 28 December 2014. Operations in Afghanistan by US forces were then conducted as part of Operation Freedom's Sentinel. DoD News, Defense Media Activity, 'Obama, Hagel mark end of Operation Enduring Freedom', 28 December 2014. U.S. Department of Defense, <https://dod.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/603860/obama-hagel-mark-end-of-operation-enduring-freedom/> (accessed 7 January 2019).
- <sup>43</sup> On this, see Steve Coll, 'Don't Look Back', *The New Yorker*, 1 March 2010; and Matt Waldman, *The Sun in the Sky: The Relationship between Pakistan's ISI and Afghan Insurgents*, Crisis States working papers series 2/18 (London: Crisis States Research Centre, LSE, 2010).
- <sup>44</sup> Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The CIA and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan, 2001-2016* (London: Penguin, 2019), p. 560.
- <sup>45</sup> Max Metzger, 'ISIS have made their move into Afghanistan says army general', *Newsweek*, 13 January 2015.
- <sup>46</sup> United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), *Afghanistan: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict – Annual Report 2018* [https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/afghanistan\\_protection\\_of\\_civilians\\_annual\\_report\\_2017\\_final\\_6\\_march.pdf](https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/afghanistan_protection_of_civilians_annual_report_2017_final_6_march.pdf) (accessed 8 August 2018).
- <sup>47</sup> Reuters (Kabul), '“We have no security”: Kabul reels from deadly ambulance bombing', *The Guardian* (London), 28 January 2018.
- <sup>48</sup> Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan* (Arlington, VA: SIGAR, 2017).
- <sup>49</sup> Between 1 January 2008 and 17 June 2017 the total number of coalition deaths from green-on-blue attacks was 152 killed and a further 200 wounded. On this, see Bill Roggio and Lisa Lundquist, 'Green-on-Blue Attacks in Afghanistan: The Data', *FDD's Long War Journal*, 17 June 2017. [https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/08/green-on-blue\\_attack.php](https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/08/green-on-blue_attack.php) (accessed 7 January 2019).
- <sup>50</sup> On this, see Bill Roggio and Lisa Lundquist, 'Green-on-Blue Attacks in Afghanistan: The Data', *FDD's Long War Journal*, 21 March 2017. [https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2017/03/21/green-on-blue\\_attacks\\_in\\_afghanistan\\_the\\_data\\_111015.html](https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2017/03/21/green-on-blue_attacks_in_afghanistan_the_data_111015.html) (accessed 8 August 2018).
- <sup>51</sup> Rudyard Kipling, 'The Ballad of East and West', 1889. Quoted in Richard Winefield, *Never the twain shall meet: Bell, Gallaudet, and the communications debate* (Washington DC: Gallaudet University Press, 1987), p. v.
- <sup>52</sup> For Marc Sageman's thinking, see his *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).
- <sup>53</sup> The essays in this volume comprise the following pieces: 'The Unchanging Nature of Asymmetric Warfare' by Marianne Dahl (Peace Research Institute Oslo, Norway), Håvard Møkleiv Nygård (Peace Research Institute Oslo, Norway), Scott Gates and Kaushik Roy; 'Great Mughals, Warfare and COIN in Afghanistan: 1520-1707'

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by Kaushik Roy; 'Counter-Insurgency and Empire: The British Experience with Afghanistan and the North-West Frontier, 1838-1947' by John Ferris (University of Calgary, Canada); 'How Afghanistan Was Broken: The Disaster of the Soviet Intervention' by Pavel K. Baev (Centre for the Study of Civil War, Peace Research Institute Oslo, Norway); 'Mujahidin vs. Communists: Analysing the Mujahidin's war strategies after Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan' by Anne Stenersen (Norwegian Defence Research Establishment); and 'Explaining NATO's limitations and the Taliban's Resilience' by Abdulkader H. Sinno (Indiana University, Bloomington, USA); 'Regional Dimensions' by Kristian Harpviken (Peace Research Institute, Oslo, Norway); 'The Afghan National Army and Counter-Insurgency' by Robert Johnson (University of Oxford, UK); and 'The Country as a Hole: Imagined States and the Failure of Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan' by Ivan Arreguín-Toft (Boston University, USA).

<sup>54</sup> Scott Gates and Kaushik Roy 'Introduction: Armies, Warfare and the State in Afghanistan from Pre-modern Times to the Present Era' in Scott Gates and Kaushik Roy (eds), *War and State-Building in Afghanistan: Historical and Modern Perspectives* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 1.

<sup>55</sup> Roy, 'Great Mughals, Warfare and COIN in Afghanistan', pp. 72-3.

<sup>56</sup> Arreguín-Toft, 'The Country as a Hole', pp. 221-2.

<sup>57</sup> Ferris, 'Counter-Insurgency and Empire', p. 106.

<sup>58</sup> Baev, 'How Afghanistan Was Broken', p. 126.

<sup>59</sup> Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, p. 336.

<sup>60</sup> Naveed Siddiqui, 'Afghanistan will never recognise the Durand Line: Hamid Karzai', *Dawn* (Karachi), 5 March 2017. On this, see Ahmad Shaye Qassem, 'Pak-Afghan Relations: The Durand Line Issue', *Policy Perspectives*, 5/2 (2008): 87-102.

<sup>61</sup> Arreguín-Toft, 'The Country as a Hole', p. 240.

<sup>62</sup> Jeanne Sahadi, 'The financial cost of 16 years in Afghanistan', *CNN Money*. <http://money.cnn.com/2017/08/21/news/economy/war-costs-afghanistan/index.html> (accessed 8 August 2018).

<sup>63</sup> Arreguín-Toft, 'The Country as a Hole', p. 241.

<sup>64</sup> On 28 May 1998, Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif announced: 'Today we have settled scores with India by detonating five nuclear devices of our own. We have paid them back.' Samina Ahmed, 'Pakistan's Nuclear Weapons Program: Turning Points and Nuclear Choices', *International Security*, 23/4 (1999), p.195.