

# BOOKS

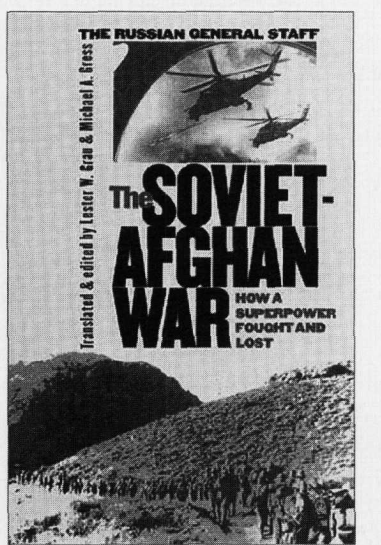
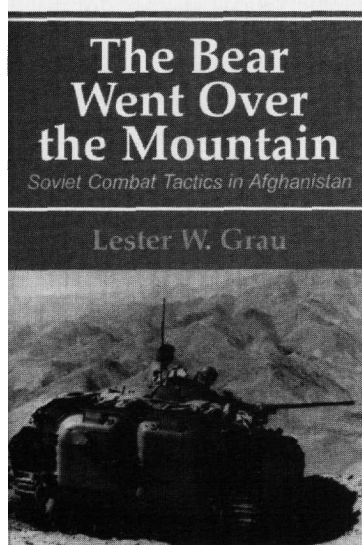
## When Goliath Fell

reviewed by Col Drew A. Bennett

*The Bear Over the Mountain was first reviewed in the June 1999 issue of the Gazette. The following review incorporates this book as a reference for new lessons learned from the Soviet-Afghan conflict.*

**THE BEAR WENT OVER THE MOUNTAIN: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan.** By Lester W. Grau. Frank Cass Publishers, Portland, OR, 1998, 220 pp., \$24.50. (Member \$22.00)

**THE SOVIET-AFGHAN WAR: How a Superpower Fought and Lost.** Translated & edited by Lester W. Grau & Michael A. Gress. University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, 2002, 392 pp., \$17.95. (Member \$16.16)



Just as many people scrambled to learn about Iraq and Kuwait during the Gulf War, current operations in Afghanistan have increased the demand for information about this region and its inhabitants. Of significant interest to military professionals is the conduct of the Soviet-Afghan War (1979–89). These two books offer a unique Russian perspective on that conflict.

Mr. Grau has studied the Soviet-Afghan war extensively and, in addition to these two books, coauthored *The Other Side of the Mountain: Mujahideen Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War*. A retired lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army, Mr. Grau uses his Vietnam War experience throughout his books, often comparing the Soviet guerrilla war in Afghanistan to the United States' experience in Vietnam.

The coeditor of *The Soviet-Afghan War*, Michael Gress, draws on his experience as a former soldier in the Soviet Army and native of Siberia.

*The Bear Went Over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan* is a compilation of tactical vignettes primarily taken from the Russian Frunze Academy, the equivalent of a command and staff college. A drawn map accompanies each vignette and uses graphics to illustrate troop dispositions and actions. Additionally, the editor ends each vignette with comments providing amplifying insights and summarizes the lessons learned in a concluding chapter.

*The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost* was written by the Russian General Staff. This work almost went unpublished as the Russian Armed Forces lacked the money to print the manuscript, and efforts for a commercial publication could not find backing in the changing marketplace and Chechnyan War-weary public of Russia. As a companion to his other works on the subject, Grau acquired the rights to the manuscript that provides an account of the war from the point of view of the Russian military leadership. However, the final product includes numerous evaluations and comments by the editors that are just as valuable as the Russian text.

Both books use many of the same vignettes covering Soviet-Afghan engagements. Indeed, there are almost two dozen footnotes throughout *The Soviet-Afghan War*, particularly in the chapter entitled "Combined Arms Tactics," referencing *The Bear Went Over the Mountain* and recommending it for a more detailed discussion. While *The Bear Went Over the Mountain* focuses on motorized rifle

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and air-assault unit tactics, *The Soviet-Afghan War* covers tactics and operations, discussing how the various branches fought, including chapters titled "Combat Support" and "Combat Service Support."

The use of the Vietnam War to provide a backdrop for the Soviet experience in Afghanistan is illuminating. First, there are major differences. Afghanistan is five times the size of Vietnam, yet at any one time the Soviets used only a quarter of the number of forces used by the United States. The United States slowly entered the Vietnam War, while the Soviet Union conducted a well-prepared and successful lightning operation to invade Afghanistan and topple the government. The Soviet Union was strongest at the operational level and weakest at the tactical level, while the United States was arguably strongest at the tactical level and weakest at the strategic level. I am reminded of the encounter between a North Vietnamese Army (NVA) colonel and U.S. Army COL Harry Summers at the end of the Vietnam War. COL Summers declared, "You know you never defeated us on the battlefield," and the NVA colonel replied, "That may be so, but it is also irrelevant."

Then there are the many similarities. Both wars were fought between technologically superior superpowers with an industrial base against guerrilla fighters. The use of mines and rocket propelled grenades is important in both conflicts, although the use of Stinger missiles becomes significant in the latter stages of the Afghan War. A startling revelation of this book is that given the four to one United States to Soviet troop strength, the casualty rates were similar. During the 9 years of the Vietnam War, the United States lost over 211,500 casualties compared to over 63,700 battlefield casualties suffered by the Soviets during their 10-year war period. This is almost double the "official" number previously reported. Like Vietnam, the enemy in Afghanistan used "terrorism, sabotage, and the most barbarous methods of war" and the borders of adjacent countries to cover their operations. Both superpowers used conscripts to fight; however, the use of professional noncommissioned offi-

cers by the United States was significantly different. Both countries had problems operating with "loyal" host-nation forces that were usually less capable and too often corrupt, incompetent, or infiltrated by the enemy. Soviet and U.S. artillery and airstrikes often alienated the population and forced large numbers of refugees. On these two topics, I was reminded of Neil Sheehans' book, *A Bright Shining Lie*.

The Soviet perspective is often amazing. The Soviet Union was completely focused on major armored mechanized operations in Europe. Because of this focus, despite its extensive World War II experience and recent efforts supporting North Vietnam, the Soviet Union did not have detailed training manuals on how to fight a guerrilla war. Far too many Soviet troops were tied up in providing security for base camps, airfields, cities, and supply lines. Too often ground troops in the field were tied to their

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armored personnel carriers (APCs) and operations during daylight. The Soviets were convinced that their enemy had more organized structure and training than actually existed. Distorted by their Marxism-Leninism philosophy, the Soviets never understood their enemy and could not comprehend a popular uprising against a Communist state. The suppression of the media is almost impossible to comprehend. By the end of 1983, despite having suffered 6,262 killed in action and 9,880 wounded in action, the Soviet press had only reported 6 dead and wounded. Another astounding lesson concerns the Soviets' lack of medical care and sanitation. Over two-thirds of all Soviet troops fell victim to disease (415,932), and on any given day almost one-third of a unit would be incapacitated by hepatitis, typhus, malaria, dysentery, and meningitis.

The Afghan terrain and road network has changed little since the Soviets left. During the 10-year war the Soviets lost 118 jets, 333 helicopters, 147 tanks, 1,314 APCs, 433 artillery pieces, and 11,369 trucks. However, the more important lesson

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for us today may be how the Soviets departed Afghanistan. Considered a textbook maneuver, in a two-phased operation Soviet forces successfully withdrew over 100,000 personnel, 500 tanks, 4,000 artillery pieces, and 16,000 trucks.

Providing insight into the Soviet Union, Afghanistan, guerrilla warfare, small unit tactics, and major operations, these books are a valuable addition to the library of any military professional. Officers, especially company grade, will find *The Bear Went Over the Mountain* an excellent resource for tactical decision games and small unit leader discussions. *The Soviet-Afghan War* provides a complete history of the Soviet experience and centers more on the operational level. These books are especially appropriate in light of ongoing Operation ENDURING FREEDOM in Afghanistan. Reading them may help us avoid the costly mistakes made by the Soviets.

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