

**Jump TO Article**



The article on the pages below is reprinted by permission from *United Service* (the journal of the Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales), which seeks to inform the defence and security debate in Australia and to bring an Australian perspective to that debate internationally.

The Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales (RUSI NSW) has been promoting informed debate on defence and security issues since 1888. To receive quarterly copies of *United Service* and to obtain other significant benefits of RUSI NSW membership, please see our online Membership page:

[www.rusinsw.org.au/Membership](http://www.rusinsw.org.au/Membership)



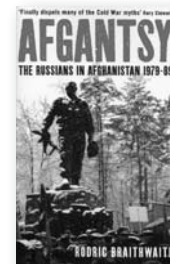
**Jump TO Article**

## ***Afgansty: the Russians in Afghanistan 1979-1989***

**by Rodric Braithwaite**

*Profile Books: Great Britain; 2012; 417 pp.; ISBN: 978146680625;*

*RRP: \$25.99 (paperback)*



This is an historical narrative, but, given events in Afghanistan today, it also serves to illustrate the maxim that those who do not learn from history are bound to repeat it.

The author, Sir Rodric Braithwaite, was the British Ambassador in Moscow when the Soviet Union collapsed. Using archives opened in the early post-Soviet years, Braithwaite shows that the invasion of Afghanistan was ordered by the Kremlin in 1979 as a defensive measure. The Russians were terrified of Islamic fundamentalism in their Central Asian domains. Braithwaite judges that the intervention was “a grave error of policy”, but was neither irrational nor unjustifiable, as the then Afghan president, Hafizullah Amin, had been responsible for executing up to 50,000 of his people.

The Soviets thought they were taking essentially a “police action” to punish “terrorists”, which would be over in a few months, when Soviet troops would withdraw. The Soviets imagined they would be welcomed with open arms, that they would restore “order”, modernise and educate a nation, and halt heroin production. Instead, they were soon resented as occupiers and loathed as infidels. Their presence unified the normally fractious Afghan tribes and factions.

Braithwaite's account follows the 10-year occupation, weaving together newly available archival material, memoirs unpublished in English, and interviews with Russian soldiers and politicians. He also includes the experiences of civilian advisors who were brought in to improve the Afghan Government's non-military functions.

Although in a limited military sense the Soviets were successful – they never lost a major battle nor any armed posts – 15,000 Soviet soldiers and as many as 1.5 million Afghans died between 1979 and 1989; millions of refugees fled to Pakistan and Iran; and much of the country's infrastructure was destroyed.

As soon as the last of the old Soviet leaders had died in office, the Soviets were determined to find an exit. Gorbachev took the decision to pull out in 1985, more than a year before the first of the United States supplied Stinger missiles was fired. The Soviets realised that they had become disastrously embroiled in an interminable civil war whose roots went back at least as far as 1975, when Gulbuddin Hekmatyar had led a brief Islamist uprising against Daud's government. Far from their withdrawal leading to a free and peaceable Afghanistan, Gorbachev predicted in 1987 that it would be followed by a bloodbath.

The West did not see it this way, however. To the Americans, “even the least reputable of the mujahedeen leaders” became seen as “heroes”. Some of them were very disreputable and more than kept score with the Soviets for atrocities. Hekmatyar, the main beneficiary of support from both the Americans and the Pakistanis, was arguably the worst of a bloodthirsty, venal and quarrelsome lot.

The United States should have known better than to back mujahedeen of any stripe until the fall of the last Communist president, in 1992. The CIA reported that he would likely be replaced by an Islamic fundamentalist regime that “may be actively hostile, especially towards the United States”. That is exactly what happened when the Taliban took power in 1996. Within a few years, men such as Hekmatyar were to become allies of Al Qaeda. He was later declared a “global terrorist” by the United States in 2003, while the southern warlord, Jalaluddin Haqqani, ended up as number three on the Americans' most wanted list after 11 September 2001.

Today, Braithwaite claims, the West is still dealing, not with the post-September 11 decision to go after Osama bin Laden, but embarking on another poorly-conceived intervention in Afghanistan. Surely, someone should have reminded the White House that Afghans do not take kindly to anyone telling them what to do. The British invaded Afghanistan three times, in 1839, 1878 and 1919; the Russians twice, in 1929 and 1979; and the United States once, in 2001. Generally, the results have been the same. Installed leaders have never rallied the Afghan people together; government forces could hold the cities and forts, but never the countryside; and their presence only served to unite the Afghans against them. In 1921, Russian General Snegarev wrote that: “the country is extremely well-adapted to a passive resistance. Its mountainous nature and the proud and freedom-loving character of its people, combined with the lack of adequate roads, makes it very difficult to conquer and even harder to hold.”

It is a great pity that this book was not published in late 2001. Nevertheless, the book is mainly one for military historians. The history and lessons of the current war in Afghanistan cannot yet be written.

**Marcus Fielding<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Colonel Fielding, a councillor of the Royal United Services Institute of Victoria, served in the United Nations Mine Clearance Training Team in Pakistan and Afghanistan in 1992. He visited de-mining programmes in Mujahedeen-held territory and was in Peshawar when Kabul fell to the Mujahedeen on 25 April 1992.