

***No Miracles: The Failure of Soviet Decision-Making in the Afghan War***

Michael R. Fenzel (Stanford University Press, 2017), 192 pp., list of abbreviations, references, index, appendix, notes.

***Reviewed by Ryan Shaffer***

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Michael R. Fenzel examines decisionmaking inside the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) before and during the Afghan War, with attention to decisions made as the Soviet military encountered increasing losses from tactical and operational problems. Fenzel, a brigadier general in the US Army and former director of the National Security Council Staff, explores why Soviet leaders “persisted” as the planning and strategy began “unraveling” (1) and it became unlikely they would achieve their strategic objectives. Fenzel is not interested in recounting all the reasons for the Soviet failure or analyzing the actual fighting, but focuses on three issues: poor civil-military relations, rapid Soviet leadership turnover, and the Soviets’ belief that global power was linked to success in Afghanistan. Fenzel draws from translated Politburo meeting minutes between 1978 and 1989 “as a basis for evaluating the interaction between key members of the Politburo over the issue of Afghanistan [which] provides a critical perspective on how the Soviet-Afghan War began, how it was fought, and how and why it was ultimately lost.” (4) He argues that “[t]he primary responsibility for Soviet failure begins at the center of power in Moscow” and that “Soviet failure at the political level was attributable to a civil–military divide, the rapid succession of leadership, and a persistent fear of damaging the USSR’s international reputation.” (5)

The book’s eight chapters are organized chronologically. Fenzel describes preparations for the war and the historical evolution of Communist Party–military relations, noting that the invasion “occurred at a time when the USSR appeared to be at the height of its military power and international influence, and at a time of generally friction-free civil–military relations.” (11) He writes that there is no evidence the Soviets were involved in the 1978 coup against Mohammad Daoud, but Moscow helped the communist government as a way to stop US encroachment and expand Soviet influence. Moving to Leonid Brezhnev (1906–1982) and the deliberations for invading Afghanistan in late 1979, Fenzel explains the

motive as blocking “American meddling” and preventing an Iranian-style revolution that could destabilize Soviet Muslim populations. (29) Dramatic reforms from the Afghan communists antagonized the Muslim population, prompting concerns in the Politburo and calls by the Soviet military to appease Afghan government critics, which was ignored and led to a unilateral Soviet invasion to take control of the country. Fenzel argues that in this process the decisionmakers never considered “protracted war” was possible and the Soviets’ previous success caused them “to overestimate both the value of what their interventions had achieved and the ease and efficiency with which effective assistance could be provided.” (57)

The book’s second half explores decisionmaking during the war, from 1980 until the 1989 withdrawal. Fenzel describes the fundamental disagreement on the war strategy between civil and military figures, which was characterized by the Politburo’s seeing Soviet military leaders as “underlings” who would obey orders without question and quickly produce a victory. A small group on the Politburo made key decisions in secret and received mounting doubts from military leaders, but group members were overwhelmed by selective positive reports about the ground situation improving. The policies changed little after Brezhnev’s death in November 1982, when Yuri Andropov (1914–1984) escalated the war and “he involved himself in military operations.” (74) Following Andropov’s death, Konstantin Chernenko (1911–85) also failed to change course and the civil–military divide grew. The military’s receiving more munitions to increase force only unified the resistance in Afghanistan against foreign intervention.

Turning to Mikhail Gorbachev’s desire to withdraw in 1985, Fenzel explores how Gorbachev gave military leaders one year to settle the “Afghan problem,” as he consolidated his political power. During the year, fighting intensified and Gorbachev announced his desire for a withdrawal, which needed ratification from the Com-

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munist Party of the Soviet Union. Gorbachev's ensuing domestic reforms to promote transparency and economic growth generated political debate. At the same time, he sought to streamline government as the military was demoralized by the Afghan conflict and lost its influence. In order to withdraw, Moscow had to accept a neutral government in Kabul under a national reconciliation process with representatives from all political factions. Fenzel argues the "orthodox communists had blocked all Afghan withdrawal initiatives . . . [and] . . . together with the lack of any rapport with senior military leaders, delayed the execution of Gorbachev's proclaimed intention to leave as soon as possible." (118)

*No Miracles* provides new insight into the Afghan War and the Soviet leadership, focusing on decisions made in Moscow rather than on the fighting itself. Fenzel examines how previous explanations for the Soviet failure are exaggerated or inadequate because Soviet leaders did not understand the realities on the ground—the war's outcome was not due to Soviet troops' failure, or to the

Afghan state, or to military weakness. He successfully demonstrates the "fear of losing prestige, failure to coordinate decisions with the military, and years of disruptive successions cut against the development of an effective strategy . . . [and] . . . a severely strained civil-military relationship made the war a politically poisonous issue" that prevented a quicker withdrawal, once it was clear the strategic goals could not be achieved. (135)

Though a well-argued study, it would have been useful to more deeply explore the Soviet intelligence that shaped the political leadership's decisions rather than the overly broad discussions about intelligence. Fenzel correctly points out that the Soviet leadership had many different priorities and crises during this time, but he could have discussed how the decisionmaking was unique—or not—by comparing the Afghan intervention with other instances of Soviet involvement in places like Africa. Nonetheless, this book is highly recommended for scholars of Soviet and Afghanistan history and students of Cold War-era international relations.



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