Resisting the Elephant

AFGHANISTAN: THE GREAT GAME REVISITED. Edited by ROSANNE KLASS. *Freedom House. 519 pp. $29.95.*

AMONG THE AFGHANS. By ARTHUR BONNER. *Duke University Press. 366 pp. $27.95.*

THE WIND BLOWS AWAY OUR WORDS. By DORIS LESSING. *Vintage Books. 171 pp. $5.95.*

Reviewed by DANIEL PIPES

As the Soviet-Afghan war has continued year after year, it has taken a terrible toll in human lives. Out of a population of 16 million before the war began in 1979, more than 1 million civilians are dead, 5 million live in desperate conditions of exile (mostly in Pakistan and Iran), and 1.5 million have relocated within the country (mostly to the capital, Kabul). In other words, fully half the Afghan population has been killed, ravaged, or in other ways uprooted by the war, and that number grows all the time; the other half hangs on precariously in the crossfire of a deadly conflict.

Despite this immense human cost, rarely has the Afghan war made headlines in the United States or captured the American imagination —at any rate not until recently, when the Soviet Union indicated its qualified intention of withdrawing its military forces. But over the years a substantial literature on the subject has emerged, and in the last months alone a number of books have been published that help clarify what has been happening in that country.

Afghanistan: The Great Game Revisited is a collection of essays on the Soviet dimension of the conflict edited by Rosanne Klass of Freedom House. The 19th-century term "great game," popularized by Rudyard Kipling, sums up the contest between the Russian empire, seeking access to India and the Indian Ocean, and the British efforts to stop it. That game has changed in many ways: Communists now rule Russia, Britons have long since given way to Americans, and the Persian Gulf, not India, today constitutes the prize. But the game remains constant in some key respects: in particular, as is emphasized in nearly every one of this book's thirteen chapters, in the Soviet adherence to older Russian ambitions.

Of the many features of contemporary Soviet behavior that hark back to czarist times, perhaps the most important is that graphically described by an Afghan king in 1900:

> The Russian policy of aggression is slow and steady but firm and unchangeable. . . . Their habit of forward movement resembles the habit of the elephant, who examines a spot thoroughly before he places his foot upon it, and when once he puts his weight there is no going back, and no taking another step in a hurry until he has put his full weight on the first foot, and has smashed everything that lies under it.

That the Russians prepare very carefully before taking a step is borne out in the case of Afghanistan by their long-term planning between 1917 and the invasion in 1979—the subject of one fine chapter here. Two further chapters on Soviet economic interests in Afghanistan (which include hundreds of mineral deposits, all sorts of fuels, and much else) and a third on strategic interests make it clear why "there is no going back" even if troops are to be withdrawn. Essays on Soviet military operations, cultural policy, and human-rights abuses confirm that the elephant has already been smashing everything underfoot.

Three essays especially stand out in this well-organized and clear-sighted volume. Rosanne Klass's introduction provides perhaps the most persuasive case anywhere in print for why decent people should make the Afghan cause their own. Eloquently and with restrained passion she surveys every aspect of the war, from the Soviets' long-term geostrategic intentions to their widespread and gratuitous desecration of Afghan art. Perhaps most importantly, she shows how concerned the Soviet leaders are with world opinion, and therefore the extent to which the words and actions of Westerners have a direct impact. The Afghan *mujahideen* (fighters) are on the front lines, to be sure, but we too have a role to play.

In the second of these essays, Yossef Bodansky sheds new—and disturbing—light on the Soviet war effort. "The Soviet military appears to be delighted with its strategic and tactical gains resulting from the seizure of Afghanistan, and unconcerned about the costs," in part because those costs seem to be exceedingly low. Thanks to the resources pillaged from Afghanistan, the Soviet war effort has virtually paid for itself. As for casualties, Bodansky notes that current rates (from all causes) in Afghanistan are "well within the average of the Soviet armed forces"—and are regularly *lower* than those of some units on routine exercises and maneuvers. He writes that morale and dedication are strong among officers and NCO's, in part because they rise quickly through the ranks (this is, for example, how the new Minister of Defense, Dimitri T. Yazov, made his mark).

Bodansky believes the war has led to great improvements in Soviet military tactics. Thus, the 1984 switch from conventional forces to special operations he calls "the most profound and far-reaching"

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change in the Soviet armed forces since nuclear weapons were introduced. Also, in his judgment, the heavy Soviet use of chemical warfare in Afghanistan has created a dependence on this powerful weapon that virtually ensures it will be used again in future conflicts.

Finally, as Bodansky reads the map, the borders have already changed. A small part of Afghanistan, the Wakhan Valley, was brought under direct Soviet control in 1980 and is now part of the USSR in all but name. The northern provinces of Afghanistan, already integrated into the network of Soviet political, economic, and cultural institutions, are but a step behind.

If Bodansky consistently offers the most pessimistic gloss on events, far more optimistic is the assessment of Alexandre Bennigsen, a lifelong student of the Muslims of Soviet Central Asia. Bennigsen expects that the Afghan war will lead to serious troubles within the USSR itself. He sees the heroic fight put up by the *mujahideen* as a sign to the Central Asians that the Red Army is not invincible, and that their own future under Moscow's rule is therefore not immutable. The Central Asians may once have accepted and internalized the Soviet portrayal of Islam as a medieval relic; today, they believe it contains much more dynamism than the "dusty and bureaucratic" doctrine of Marxism-Leninism. A high-ranking Communist party official of Muslim origins told Bennigsen that "the resistance of the Afghan is for us the first gleam of hope since the Russian conquest." It is instructive to read these words against the sober analysis of Bodansky.

WHERE *Afghanistan: The Great Game Revisited* is a work of scholarship, Arthur Bonner's *Among the Afghans* is a superior work of journalism. Unlike those many newspapermen who have taken a quick trip into Afghanistan and then hurriedly announced their findings, Bonner devoted several years to learning about the country, researching the war, and traveling with the *mujahideen*. He has transformed his learning and experience into an eloquent and engrossing traveler's tale.

Bonner undertook his journey not for political reasons but—at the age of sixty-two!—out of the classic motives of the adventurer. "After years of a television desk job in New York, I wanted to be a foreign correspondent again." He got a commission from the New York *Times* and, in all, spent eight months inside Afghanistan on seven separate excursions.

The charm of *Among the Afghans* lies primarily in its evocation, 19th-century style, of the traveler's experience among an alien people. But these qualities cannot be captured in a review; they come out only in a full and intensive reading in which one can immerse oneself in Bonner's powerful account of his months in the crisp mountain air, where he suffered from intermittent ailments and always felt detached from his companions by language and cultural barriers.

Much of what Bonner found is little known in the West, such as the intense degradation of the Afghan environment and the deepening economic dependence of the Resistance forces on opium crops. Even the *mujahideen* way of life differs from common preconceptions of these so-called primitive fighters. When nothing better is available, the *mujahideen* do sleep in caves, but they prefer mosques or teahouses, small commercial establishments along the main supply routes. Similarly, while the *mujahideen* are indeed capable of walking long distances, they prefer to charter trucks, hop onto scheduled buses, hire taxis, drive tractors, rent motorcycles, and make use of captured Russian jeeps and four-wheel trucks. They even hitch rides.

BEYOND its fine descriptions of the *mujahideen* way of life, *Among the Afghans* provides a fund of information about the war itself. Bonner divides his assessment into two parts: the *mujahideen* military effort, and relations with civilians. Rebel strengths are well known: the decentralized nature of their effort ("They are so divided there is no target for the Russians to aim at"), their intense motivation ("If only one *mujahid* is left, he will fight the Russians"), and their warrior ethic. But tenacity alone is not enough; internal disunity and a complete absence of strategic planning hobble *mujahideen* capabilities. A former brigadier general now leading a rebel force stressed to Bonner the paramount need for a trained army, "not soldiers who sit around for two or three months, who eat and don't fight."

Bonner holds, in other words, that the *mujahideen* are exploiting only a fraction of their potential force. The Afghans' military record thus echoes their efforts at economic modernization in the 20th century: strong will and ambitious goals are accompanied by poor planning and chaotic execution.

In the end, however, Bonner regards the military balance as secondary, for the war in Afghanistan itself is not strictly military. As Alain Chevalerias, a French reporter with five years' experience in Afghanistan, has put it, "This war is 75 percent political and only 25 percent military." What began as a stark armed confrontation has, with the years, become an intricate competition for allegiance. This explains the conflict's many gray areas, what Bonner calls "curious examples of live and let live." Thus, spare parts for a hydroelectric dam run by the *mujahideen* come from Kabul. Afghan army outposts and *mujahideen* camps coexist here and there, and almost all of Hazarajat, the Shi'i region at the center of the country, is neutral territory.

These complexities point to the conflict's true center of gravity, which has little to do with the number of villages destroyed or helicopter gunships shot down, or, for that matter, with the direction of Pakistani or American policies. Echoing the conclusions of Olivier Roy, the well-informed French anthropologist and author of *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*,* Bonner argues that the fate of the country lies with the actions and political choices of the civilian, non-*mujahideen* population still resi-

* Cambridge University Press, 253 pp., $24.95.

dent in Afghanistan. Will it aid the Resistance or the Kabul government, or will it opt for neutrality? If Soviet forces withdraw, to which groups will it give support?

The Soviets also appreciate the centrality of civilian Afghan opinion. After early blunders, they quickly realized they would win the war only by attracting enough internal support to make life difficult for the *mujahideen*, and so they changed their ways and tried not to alienate the populace. With the exception of the 1984 campaign in Panjshir, Bonner notes, the Soviets have not engaged in carpet bombing, but concentrate their fire on *mujahideen*-related targets. Soviet atrocities still abound, but they have a political purpose and are not indiscriminate.* Moscow can never hope to win the population's active sympathies, but it does not need to; acquiescence suffices.

PERHAPS even more critical than Soviet behavior toward the Afghan populace is *mujahideen* treatment of civilians. Clearly, there are many tensions: Bonner recounts how in one case, peasants pressed some fighters to leave their village (for fear of Soviet aerial attacks), then exploited *mujahideen* neediness to extract a premium price for a sickly donkey. When Bonner's group tried to get into a mosque for a night, the elders refused to hand over the key. The *mujahideen* are capable of acting in a similarly ungenerous way: when a village building used as a party headquarters was bombed, and the nearby houses were ruined, the villagers got no help for repairs.

These tensions should not be exaggerated. More noteworthy than a refusal to hand over keys to a mosque or an attempt to overcharge for an ailing donkey is that the *mujahideen* do not impose their will through force (although it would be easy to do so). They understand that their own victory depends ultimately on the villagers' remaining in the countryside, and brutality toward the civilian populace would thus undercut their ability to battle the Red Army.

For this reason, the *mujahideen* show remarkable forbearance. On one occasion several of Bonner's companions stripped ears of corn from a nearby field and cooked them over a fire. "Two farmers saw them and came running brandishing their hoes as weapons. Razar Khan [the group's leader] intervened to calm them . . . [and] gave them some money to placate them. They took the money but did not seem happy." The point here is not the clash between the two parties but the fact that the farmers felt confident enough to brandish their

* Unfortunately, this observation reflects the limits of Bonner's experience more than the restraints on Soviet brutality. As Jeri Laber and Barnett R. Rubin chronicle in *"A Nation is Dying": Afghanistan Under the Soviets, 1979-87* (Northwestern University Press, 162 pp., $22.95), the very many human rights abuses have not decreased in recent years.

hoes against the very heavily armed *mujahideen*. About *mujahideen* relations with civilians in general, Bonner writes: "Theirs is a moral and ethical war, fought according to Islamic codes that everyone knows and respects. This explains why there are no death squads or torture chambers."

Still, relations do seem to have degenerated as the fighters have grown frustrated and civilians have become weary. A former professor at Kabul University explains rhetorically:

> Seven years ago, the *mujahideen* were called angels and were respected as saints. When a *mujahid* walked the streets, old men collected the dust from his footprints and kept it in their houses as sacred. . . . Now a *mujahid* has to knock many times on a door. An old man will come out and will look at him in a hateful manner and will close the door.

Bonner worries especially about the war lords who neglect the educational, medical, and economic interests of their subjects. More generally, he notes, "the weakness of the jihad is that it lacks a positive political program to meet the needs of the community . . . except for a few schools in Amarakh, I did not see a single program to help civilians."

Also worrisome are the deep and lasting divisions in Afghan society —Sunni and Shi'i, city and country, nomad and farmer, trader and robber, one valley and the next. In contrast to Olivier Roy, who holds that "the spiritual growth of the people [in the course of the war] is a striking phenomenon," Bonner perceives a continuation of age-old disunity.

NOT every new book on Afghanistan meets the high standards set by Arthur Bonner and Rosanne Klass and her contributors. *The Wind Blows Away Our Words: A Firsthand Account of the Afghan Resistance* by the well-known novelist Doris Lessing is so flawed a work that it may actually diminish one's understanding of the war. If the book deserves attention at all it is not just because Mrs. Lessing is a major writer, here acting out of an admirable motive, but because her account does contain one unexpectedly redeeming feature.

To begin with the flaws: the book rests on a basic deceit, for despite Mrs. Lessing's claim to be providing a "firsthand account of the Afghan resistance," she never set foot in Afghanistan, never traveled with the *mujahideen*, and did not witness a single battle. The whole of her very brief visit was spent in Pakistan. Most of *The Wind Blows Away Our Words* consits of Doris Lessing's thoughts as she sojourned in a dirty, poor, but romantic locale, and a more accurate subtitle for the resulting volume would be: "A British feminist's reaction to Pakistan."

Mrs. Lessing does not even achieve what one would expect of a renowned novelist, namely, an affecting or memorable evocation of the Afghan people. Those she did meet remain pallid figures trapped in their cultural roles, stereotypes rather than individuals. She also mangles the interpretation of their culture. For example, she decides that the emphasis on male honor and courage is just a misguided public-relations ploy, observing (in a classic instance of cultural imperialism) that the *mujahideen* "have no idea how to present themselves sympathetically to the Westerner, going into all kinds of heroic postures, talking about martyrdom, dying for their faith, Paradise with maidens and pretty boys and wine, and so on and so forth."

MRS. LESSING'S facts are a calamity. She has World War II lasting four years and the Prophet Muhammad's grandsons murdered in the 5th century (Muhammad was born in 570). Only a cavalier disregard for detail could turn Harakat (the name of a political party) into the exotic-looking Hiriquat. Most bizarre of all, she concludes from the presence of biblical names among the Afghans, from Hebrew inscriptions on their gravestones, and from certain Jewish customs among them that the Afghans "are, in short, Jews." (By conventional reckoning, more than 99 percent of Afghans are Muslim; the Jewish population of the country amounts to just a few thousand souls.)

She even distorts the one thing she actually saw—life in the refugee camps—stating that refugees must join one of the Afghan political parties in order to gain access to the food and other aid provided by international donors when in fact it is the United Nations High Commission for Refugees with whom they must register. As Radek Sikorski observed in a review of this book, "Mrs. Lessing is good on atmosphere, on what it feels like to be a confused journalist."

Other inaccuracies are more serious, and actually set back the *mujahideen* cause. Here is Mrs. Lessing's picture of the way in which KhAD, the Afghan secret police, gathers intelligence: "There are hotels and bars [in Peshawar] where journalists congregate. KhAD agents, who have placed themselves just behind you, their backs to you. tilt their chairs toward you, as in a comic opera, if some subject of interest is introduced." Contrast this light scene with Barnett R. Rubin's harrowing account (in the Klass volume) of the Pul-i Charkhi prison in Kabul, where KhAD uses rather more determined methods of extracting information, including beatings, death threats, pulling out hair and fingernails, near-drownings, sleep-deprivation, strangling, and, most commonly, electric shocks.

The Wind Blows Away Our Words has all the ingredients of that unfortunate new genre, the "snap" book. In it, a famous writer spends a week or two in a political hot spot and writes an impressionistic account to further a cause. The genre calls for thick paper, large type, and lots of padding. Yet for all these deficiencies, Doris Lessing's book has its moments, and the last chapter, "The Strange Case of the Western Conscience," represents a startling, even important, *cri de coeur*—especially when one recalls that this writer spent many years as a pro-Soviet Communist and even after leaving the party (in 1956) went on to embrace the sort of trendy leftism that so dominates British intellectual life.

"It is almost impossible," Mrs. Lessing now writes, "to raise [the issue of the war in Afghanistan]

without being accused of being 'reactionary'—so polarized have our responses become, and I feel a sort of despair even trying." For Mrs. Lessing, the Left's effort to blame the U.S. government for the KAL 007 shoot-down, its display of greater outrage over Three Mile Island than over Chernobyl, and its systematic neglect of Afghanistan in contrast to its obsession with Nicaragua are all part of the same dishonorable phenomenon. She wonders how the Soviet Union, "the most brutal, cynical regime of its time," could have been "so admired, excused, by people describing themselves as humanists, humanitarians, democrats, and long after its true nature was thoroughly exposed." Mrs. Lessing is not exactly the first person to raise these points, but her stature on the literary Left endows them with unusual weight.

How will the Soviet-Afghan war turn out? Many observers, pointing to the Geneva negotiations recently under way, conclude that the fighting is nearly over. But a careful analysis of recent Soviet maneuverings suggests that Moscow's real intention is to gain control over Afghanistan through more subtle, more political tactics than those used during the past decade.

This being the case, the question remains: how will the military confrontation develop? The answer seems to depend on one's vantage point. A specialist on the Soviet military might see matters as does Yossef Bodansky:

> Since mid-1980, the [Afghan] Resistance has never constituted more than a tactical inconvenience to the Soviets. . . . In strategic terms—the consolidation of Soviet control over Southwest Asia—the Afghan Resistance has had little or no impact. Currently, the Resistance is a negligible force in Soviet calculations of the regional dynamics.

In contrast, those who best know the *mujahideen* see the war as still an open contest. Olivier Roy categorically asserts that "there is no possibility of the Resistance being crushed by might." For him, as we have seen, the outcome of the war hinges on political relations among the Afghans. Should the Soviets succeed in dividing the *mujahideen* from the civilian Afghan population, even if it takes decades, they will win; but the *mujahideen* will win if they can unify the populace behind their efforts to expel the Soviets. So long as neither side attains its goal, the war will continue without resolution.

Which of these views is correct? The longer historical perspective strongly suggests that Moscow will not abandon the fight for control of Afghanistan. The larger geographic perspective suggests, too, that the Soviets already have gained much of what they want there—cities, air bases, minerals. Yet it would be a grave error, on the basis of this analysis, for the West to give up on the *mujahideen*, and a moral tragedy if their effort were doomed on account of Western pessimism. Even if, in the end, the Soviets do prevail, it is in the Western and particularly the American interest to make their task as prolonged and costly as possible. Therefore, the lesson is to respect the pessimists but to heed the optimists.

This lesson has obvious implications at a moment when the Kremlin seems to be indicating that it is prepared to withdraw forces from Afghanistan. Soviet leaders have dissimulated many times before on this issue, and they have good reason to do so now. Promises to evacuate the Red Army offer the cheapest way to weaken international support for the *mujahideen*, as well as the surest means of provoking civil war among the fighters themselves. Unless and until the Soviets take measurable steps toward long-term disengagement, it would be foolhardy to make any concessions to them of a political nature, and even then the utmost care must be taken not to dissipate prematurely the fragile strengths of the *mujahideen*.