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Alexander Antonovich Liakhovsky. "Inside the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the Seizure of Kabul, December 1979." Trans. Gary Goldberg and Artemy Kalinovsky. *CWIHP Working Paper* 51, January 2007.

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Reviewed by **Tom Nichols**, Naval War College¹

This working paper (a small book, really, at 76 single-spaced pages) from the Cold War International History Project is a solid example of why the CWIHP has become an indispensable source of material and analysis for scholars of the Cold War. Until the late 1980s, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was often the source of guesswork and controversy, and even now there are significant gaps in our knowledge of this history-changing moment. In this study, a senior veteran and scholar of the Soviet Armed Forces presents, in great detail, events ranging from top secret discussions in the Kremlin to firefights in the streets of Kabul.

It is not a complete account, but that is probably impossible at this point in history, and it will no doubt be some time before such a synoptic volume might be written about even the first part of the war. But Liakhovsky's paper—which draws on his own books and primary research on the subject—manages to clarify some pressing questions, and particularly the question of *how* this disastrous decision was made.

Liakhovsky's study is really a two-part project. In the first part, he examines the cascade of anxieties, misinformation, fears, and eventual decisions that led to Soviet troops receiving their orders to Kabul. In the second part, he takes the reader to a ground-level, operational excursion, replete with dramatic and very human first-accounts, into the taking of Kabul and the toppling of the Afghan regime.

This latter half of the study is likely to be of more use to military historians, particularly those interested in reconstructing the combat operations of Soviet special forces during the invasion. But the first half of Liakhovsky's paper contains rich material and analysis

¹ The opinions are those of the author only.

for students of politics and international relations, and sheds light on questions beyond the invasion itself (such as the nature of Soviet civil-military relations, to name but one).

One of the most important realizations to be found in the Liakhovsky study is the degree to which the invasion was driven by internal Soviet political dynamics, and far less by actual events in the international sphere. The closed circles of decision making, the conspiratorial nature of Politburo politics, the poor flow of information, and the rejection of expert advice in favor of preconceptions (often ideologically constructed) reveal a completely dysfunctional policymaking environment in Moscow, one that had already shown itself incapable of dealing with far less complicated problems than Afghanistan.

Some might argue that there are obvious parallels here with American decisions regarding intervention in Iraq (and maybe even Vietnam). And there is, unfortunately, a certain uncomfortable symmetry to be seen, particularly in the filtering out of uncongenial information and the lack of planning for “the morning after.” But the parallels between a drama that drew the world’s democracies into open debate with each other, and a quiet conspiracy that involved perhaps only a few dozen men in Moscow and Kabul, should not be overdrawn.

One major difference here is that the Soviet Union was intervening against a friend, not a sworn enemy, and that was part of the Kremlin’s dilemma. Moscow’s “ally” in Afghanistan, Hafizullah Amin, was himself responsible for creating violent fissures in his own country, and Liakhovsky is unsparing in his depiction of Amin as little more than a thug. By late 1979, for example, Liakhovsky estimates that Amin’s attempts to use repeated purges to stay in power probably cost 50,000 lives or more, which horrified even the Soviets. (3) When a fundamentally repressive organization like the Soviet Communist Party starts sending urgent appeals to “stop the repressions” and obey “the rule of law,” it is a sure sign that things have gone awry.

Amin’s brutality placed the Soviets in a bind, as it made his continued rule impossible. (Liakhovsky even quotes a note from the U.S. Embassy, written as bystanders who “have been observing for 18 months how this Marxist party [the PDPA] has been destroying itself.”) But Amin’s answer to the deterioration in the situation was to exercise yet more brutality, arguing for “entire tribes” to be bombed into dust: “You don’t know our people,” he tells the Soviets. “The only solution is to destroy them all, from big to small!” (4)

Worse, while Soviet leaders were quite right to see Amin as “unreliable”—his grip on the country was slipping away, no matter how many people he killed—they also somehow got it into their heads that he might have some sort of association with the Central Intelligence Agency, and that he could “realign” himself at “at any moment” with the West. The provenance of this charge is unclear, and Liakhovsky seems mostly unconvinced of its truth. While he does not reach an unequivocal judgment on it, he notes that if Amin were in fact a CIA asset, he did not admit to it or use it to try to save himself, even in the last hours of his life during the battle to remove and kill him. (61)

In any case, it is clear that by early autumn of 1979, a small circle of Soviet leaders had made the decision that Amin had to go. Not only did they distrust and dislike him (and Brezhnev in particular was angered by Amin's murder of his predecessor, Taraki), but as a practical matter Afghanistan was collapsing into civil war. Liakhovsky identifies KGB chief Yuri Andropov as the prime mover behind the idea that Amin could be struck quickly and replaced with Moscow's new favorite, Babrak Karmal. There were apparently assassination plots—Liakhovsky mentions that the KGB claimed to have a plan to “counteract” Amin—and there is a reference to, but no explanation of, the mysterious suicide of Soviet Lt. Gen. Paputin after a mission of some sort to Kabul in November 1979. (8) Whatever the KGB's plans, however, by December Amin was still alive and Andropov was pushing harder for a military—that is, KGB-led—solution, leading Defense Minister Dmitrii Ustinov to note wryly: “You're quite the adventurer, Yura.” (12)

Liakhovsky is careful to take the reader through the complicated dance of Soviet memo-writing, explaining why certain leaders would sign particular reports, and so on. What emerges from the documents is that Soviet policy on the crisis in Afghanistan was the work of a cabal of three or four men—Andropov, Ustinov, Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, and a few others—who were carefully managing the decisions of the now-ill Leonid Brezhnev.

The Soviet high command, for its part, could see an intervention looming, and General Staff chief Gen. Nikolai Ogarkov in particular is depicted as making a last-ditch effort to persuade the Defense Minister to derail the plan in the Politburo. This finally led to a dressing down from Ustinov, who imperiously shouted at Ogarkov: “Are you going to teach the Politburo? You must carry out orders. You're always building intrigues! You're systematically sabotaging my decisions...What gets decided in the Politburo is none of your business.” Later, Andropov piled on. When Ogarkov warned that all of eastern Islam could turn against the USSR over the invasion, Andropov interrupted him: “Mind your own business! Politics will be taken care of by us, the party, [and] Leonid Illyich [Brezhnev]!” (18)

This episode is at odds with previous images of the Soviet civil-military relationship as more harmonious or coordinated. (I am forced to include my own work on Soviet civil-military relations here, in which I asserted that senior Soviet military leaders were far more powerful than Liakhovsky's account suggests.) Indeed, the Soviet military overall comes out quite well in Liakhovsky's telling; whether this is a bias on Liakhovsky's part (himself a military professional) is hard to know. But if his portrait of the Soviet leadership as resistant to military advice is accurate, it would explain a lot not only about the decisions leading up to the invasion but also about some of the personnel shuffles that came after it, some of which were puzzling to Sovietologists of the time, such as Ogarkov's eventual demotion in 1984 (which Liakhovsky claims is traceable back to the debates of late 1979).

While there is much more in this article, especially for historians trying to reconstruct the inner workings of the Soviet elite, a few other points emerge from Liakhovsky's study that are worth further reflection.

First, there is the distorting role of ideology in the Kremlin's decision making. Liakhovsky shows how the political importance of Afghanistan grew to meet the military resources that were being devoted to the operation, especially once the Soviet leadership decided, against all logic and evidence, that "events in [Afghanistan] had become part of a world revolutionary process." (13) Liakhovsky—rightly, in my view—rejects the criticism that Brezhnev and his circle were "fools." Rather, trapped by their own ideological beliefs, they "were simply placed in conditions where they could not fail to support a 'fraternal' Party; our allies, the other Communist parties, would not have understood this." (A similar explanation could be made for Soviet involvement in Vietnam, as the work of Russian historian Ilya Gaiduk suggests.)² "For a long time," Liakhovsky writes, "the foreign security policy [sic] of the USSR was constructed to a considerable degree on the basis of ideological dogmas." (29) This is an important contribution to the ongoing debate over the influence of ideology on foreign policy, particularly in the Soviet Union.

A second and related point is how idiosyncratically the isolated leaders of the Kremlin perceived and processed external events. Liakhovsky tells us, for example, that Brezhnev and his circle saw the late 1979 NATO decision to deploy Pershing intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Europe as the final event tipping the situation in Afghanistan toward intervention; the Kremlin felt it had "nothing left to lose," and Soviet leaders were gripped by bizarre fears of U.S. Pershing deployments in Afghanistan that would in turn threaten assets like the Baikonur cosmodrome (as though somehow a spaceport in Central Asia would be a major target during a Soviet-American nuclear exchange). (17)

There is an irony here, in that the inner Kremlin circle—by 1979 quite used to exercising Soviet power unhindered by foreign or domestic constraints—seemed to have had no concept of how their actions would be interpreted beyond the bubble of the Moscow Ring Road. More important, they did not seem to grasp how their own actions could bring about the very Western reactions they feared most. Many former Soviet officials, including Georgii Arbatov and even Mikhail Gorbachev himself, later ruminated on the short-sightedness of Soviet leaders in the 1970s, with the SS-20 deployments and the invasion of Afghanistan the worst examples of such myopia.

Perhaps the most poignant observation Liakhovsky makes us when he notes that the Politburo, on the eve of the invasion, never asked themselves the most important question: "[W]hat revolution had they gathered to defend?" (23)

² See Ilya V. Gaiduk. *Confronting Vietnam: Soviet Policy toward the Indochina Conflict, 1954-1963*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

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While there are some distracting lapses in the editing, including what seems to be a few awkwardly translated passages, and a fair number of typographical errors, this article is engrossing, especially in the first half, and will be of interest to specialists and general readers alike, although the latter part will be of more interest to those with a particular interest in Soviet military operations. A. A. Liakhovsky's study is a major addition to our knowledge on the subject, and should be read by anyone trying to understand the decision that proved to be one of the crucial turning points along the Soviet Union's road to self-destruction.

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