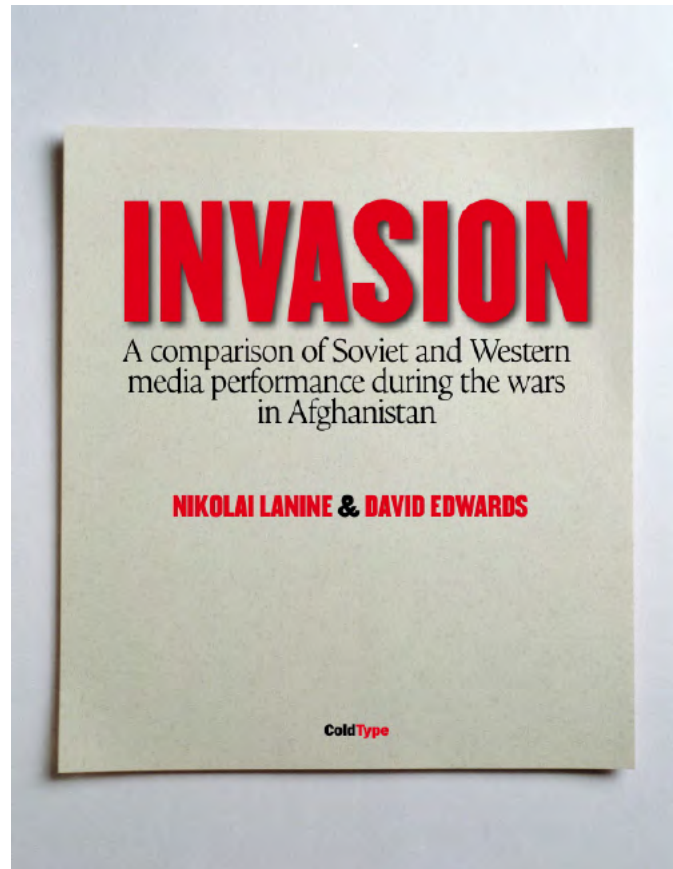


INVASION

A comparison of Soviet and Western
media performance during the wars
in Afghanistan

NIKOLAI LANINE & DAVID EDWARDS

ColdType



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Introduction

The writer Simon Louvish once told the story of a group of Soviets touring the United States before the age of glasnost. After reading the newspapers and watching TV, they were amazed to find that, on the big issues, all the opinions were the same. “In our country,” they said, “to get that result we have a dictatorship, we imprison people, we tear out their fingernails. Here you have none of that. So what’s your secret? How do you do it?” (Quoted, John Pilger, *Tell Me No Lies*, Random House, 2004, p.9)

It’s a good question, one being asked by Nikolai Lanine who served with the Soviet Army during its 1979-1989 occupation of Afghanistan, but who now lives and works as a peace activist in Canada. Lanine has spent several years trawling through Soviet-era newspaper archives comparing the propaganda of that time with modern Western media performance.

If the claims of modern professional journalism are to be believed, the similarities should be few and far between. Soviet-era media such as Pravda (meaning, ironically, “The Truth”) are a byword for state-controlled mendacity in the West. Thus Simon Jenkins commented in the *Times* in the 1980s: “There is a smack of Pravda about this pious self-censorship.” (Jenkins, ‘A new name on the tin mug of scandal,’ *The Times*, March 19, 1989)

Doris Lessing, recent winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, wrote in 1992:

“Even five, six years ago, *Izvestia*, *Pravda* and a thousand other Communist papers were written in a language that seemed designed to fill up as much space as possible without actually saying anything. Because, of course, it

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was dangerous to take up positions that might have to be defended. Now all these newspapers have rediscovered the use of language. But the heritage of dead and empty language these days is to be found in academia, and particularly in some areas of sociology and psychology.” (Lessing, ‘Questions you should never ask a writer,’ New York Times, October 13, 2007. Originally published June 26, 1992)

This standard Western association of thought control with totalitarian societies is a red herring. In fact, thought control is far more characteristic of ‘democratic’ societies - where state violence is no longer an option, propaganda comes into its own.

After all, it is a remarkable fact that our society never discusses the possibility that a corporate media system monitoring a society dominated by large corporations might be something other than free, open and honest. Consider Lessing’s analysis in the light of these comments from media analyst Danny Schechter:

“We are bombarded with information, although if you look closely, most of it has a similar grammar, a similar focus and similar sources, all revolving around institutions and topics that most viewers admit in survey after survey they don’t really understand.” (Schechter, *The More You Watch The Less You Know*, Seven Stories Press, 1997, p.43)

Verbiage “designed to fill up as much space as possible without actually saying anything”, in other words, because it is “dangerous to take up positions that might have to be defended”.

How “dangerous”? David Barsamian recently asked Noam Chomsky why one regular New York Times commentator refused to recognise blindingly obvious truths embarrassing to US power. Chomsky responded:

“If he wrote that, then he wouldn’t be writing for the New York Times. There is a certain discipline that you have to meet. In a well-run society, you don’t say things you know. You say things that are required for service to power.” (Chomsky, *What We Say Goes*, Penguin, 2007, p.2)

We are very grateful to Nikolai Lanine for agreeing to co-author this piece and for his hard work over several months in making it possible. All quotations from the Soviet press archives were translated from the original by him. We are also grateful to Noam Chomsky who originally put us in touch with Nikolai.

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A Humanitarian War of Self-Defence

Inspired by the success of the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, US-backed Afghan militants – including future founders of the Taliban movement – stepped up their attacks on Afghan government forces in the late 1970s.

Fearful of the “threat to the security of [the Soviet] southern borders” (Lyahovsky & Zabrodin, *Secrets of the Afghan War*, 1991, p.48) and concerned that the conflict might spread to neighbouring Soviet republics - and so risk radicalising their dominantly Muslim populations (accounting for more than 20% of the Soviet population) - the Soviet government invaded. The invasion was a straightforward act of aggression, an attempt to crush a perceived threat to Soviet security and power.

Inevitably, the Soviet government portrayed its invasion as an act of humanitarian intervention initiated at the “request of the [Afghan] government”. (Pravda, April 27, 1980) The aim was “to prevent the establishment of... a terrorist regime and to protect the Afghan people from genocide”, and also to provide “aid in stabilising the situation and the repulsion of possible external aggression”. (Lyahovsky & Zabrodin, p.48)

Once the “terrorists” had been defeated, Afghanistan would be left to become “a stable, friendly country”. The invasion, then, was in the best interests of the Afghan people - the focus of the Soviet government’s benevolent concern.

The Soviet media presented the invasion essentially as a peacekeeping operation intended to prevent enemy atrocities. *Krasnaya Zvezda* [Red Star], a major Soviet military newspaper, reported in May 1985:

“Since the establishment of this [Soviet] base, [the Mujahadeen]’s predatory extortions, violence, [and] reprisals have stopped; and poor peasants are [now] working the land peacefully.” (*Krasnaya Zvezda*, May 1, 1985)

The same paper noted:

“Before the arrival of the Soviet soldiers here, [the area] was literally swarming with [insurgents]... [who] were ruthlessly killing... everyone, who was desperately longing for a new life... However, Soviet soldiers arrived, and life in the district has started normalising.” (*Krasnaya Zvezda*, October 27, 1985)

Voenni Vestnik [Military Bulletin] took it for granted that “...[Soviet] paratroopers are protecting peaceful [Afghan] citizens”. (*Voenni Vestnik* #4, 1983)

This, of course, was a reversal of the truth that the Soviet superpower was killing large numbers of civilians and causing great suffering to the population.

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Pravda insisted that the Afghan army had conducted military operations “at the demand of the local population” and because of “the danger to lives and property of citizens” posed by the resistance. (Pravda, February 7, 1988)

Military personnel constantly echoed government claims that intervention was required “to help the hapless Afghan people to defend their freedom, their future”. (Krasnaya Zvezda, January 5, 1988)

The invasion was also portrayed as an act of self-defence to prevent a “neighboring country with a shared Soviet-Afghan border... [from turning] into a bridgehead for... [Western] aggression against the Soviet state”. (Izvestiya, January 1, 1980) Soviet intervention was also a response to unprovoked violence by Islamic fundamentalists (described as “freedom fighters” in the West), who, it was claimed, planned to export their fundamentalist struggle across the region “‘under the green banner of Jihad’, to the territory of the Soviet Central-Asian republics”. (Lyahovsky & Zabrodin, p.45) The Soviet public were told they faced a stark choice: either fight the menace abroad, or do nothing and later face a much greater threat on home soil that would, geopolitically, “put the USSR in a very difficult situation”. (Sovetskaya Rossia [Soviet Russia], February 11, 1993)

This theme was endlessly stressed by the Soviet media system - Soviet forces were “not only defending Afghan villages. They keep the peace on the borders of [our] homeland”. (Pravda, April 2, 1987) The goal was “peace and security in the region, and also the security of the southern border of the USSR”. (Mezhdunarodnyi Ezhegodnik, 1981, p.224) The unquestioned assumption was that Soviet forces had no option but to act “pre-emptively” in “self-defence”.

Reading Soviet propaganda on these themes inevitably recalls Tony Blair’s famous assertion:

“What does the whole of our history teach us, I mean British history in particular? That if when you’re faced with a threat you decide to avoid confronting it short term, then all that happens is that in the longer term you have to confront it and confront it an even more deadly form.” (ITN News at 6:30, January 31, 2003)

To this day, many former Soviet military and media commentators continue to reinforce similar claims. Former top Soviet military adviser in Afghanistan, General Mahmut Gareev, writes in his book “My Last War” (1996) that the “situation in Afghanistan was of great importance” for the security of the Soviet state (p.363). The “high political, military and strategic interests of the USSR demanded certain actions

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and decisions”. (p.36) The Soviet leadership was “aware that events in the south of the country were exceptionally important and had great significance for the security of the Soviet state. It was impossible not to react”. (p.35-36)

After the 1979 invasion, the Afghan insurgency repeatedly launched attacks on border areas, including rocket strikes on Soviet towns. Ignoring the fact that these attacks were a *response* to Soviet aggression, the Soviet media described them as “provocative criminal acts against the Soviet territory”. (Izvestiya, April 20, 1987)

For Democracy And Human Rights - America And Britain Attack

In near-identical fashion, the British and American governments have presented their invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq as acts of self-defence which also happen to be in the best interests of the Afghan and Iraqi populations.

In 2001, the then UK defence secretary Geoff Hoon insisted that, in Afghanistan, Britain “was acting in self-defence against Osama bin Laden and his Al-Qa’ida network”. (Ben Russell, ‘Parliament - terrorism debate,’ The Independent, November 2, 2001)

As with the Soviet media, the self-defensive, humanitarian intent behind both invasions are staples of much US-UK media reporting. On the April 12, 2005 edition of the BBC’s Newsnight programme, diplomatic editor Mark Urban discussed the significance of a lessening of Iraqi attacks on US forces since January:

“It is indeed the first real evidence that President Bush’s grand design of toppling a dictator and forcing a democracy into the heart of the Middle East could work.” (Urban, Newsnight, BBC2, April 12, 2005)

When George Bush declared: “we are not conquerors; we’re liberators”, he could have been quoting one of the top Soviet generals in Afghanistan, who said:

“We didn’t set ourselves the task of conquering anyone: we wanted to stabilise the situation.” (Varennikov, CNN Interview, 1998)

In April 2002, Rory Carroll wrote in the Guardian:

“Whoever is trying to destabilise Afghanistan is doing a good job. The broken cities and scorched hills so recently liberated are rediscovering fear and uncertainty.” (Carroll, ‘Blood-drenched warlord’s return,’ The Observer, April 14, 2002)

The point being that, for Carroll, as for George Bush, Afghanistan really had been

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“liberated” by the world’s superpower.

The New York Times wrote in September 2007:

“Military statistics show that U.S. forces have made some headway at protecting the Iraqi population, but there are questions over whether the gains can be sustained.” (Michael R. Gordon, ‘Assessing the “surge”,’ New York Times, September 8, 2007)

Even in reporting that a large proportion of world opinion wants to see the US leave Iraq, the BBC managed to boost the claimed humanitarian intent:

“Some 39% of people in 22 countries said troops should leave now, and 28% backed a gradual pull-out. Just 23% wanted them to stay until Iraq was safe.” (Most people ‘want Iraq pull-out,’ http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/middle_east/6981553.stm, September 7, 2007)

The idea that Iraq might not be safe until US-UK troops leave, is unthinkable to many Western journalists, as it was to Soviet journalists.

In some cases, Western reporting perhaps even surpassed Soviet propaganda. As US tanks entered Baghdad on April 9, 2003, ITN’s John Irvine declared:

“A war of three weeks has brought an end to decades of Iraqi misery.” (ITN Evening News, April 9, 2003)

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States were in response to decades of US-UK violence, and support for violence, in the Middle East. For what it’s worth, Osama bin Laden specifically cited Western oppression in Palestine, Western sanctions against Iraq, and US bases in Saudi Arabia, as reasons for the attacks. And yet, as in the Soviet case, US-UK aggression in Afghanistan and Iraq was justified as a response to attacks that were “unprovoked”. Blair even cited the 9/11 attacks as evidence to this effect on the grounds that the attacks had taken place long before the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

In both the West and the USSR, the occupations were, and are, presented as fundamentally well-intentioned acts motivated by rational fears and humanitarian aspirations.

In accordance with international law

According to the Soviet government, the 1979 invasion was justified by international law (Pravda, December 31, 1979; Gareev, 1996, p.40) and was “in complete accordance with... the 1978 Soviet-Afghan Treaty”. (Izvestiya, January 1, 1980) The Soviet state had

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to honour its obligations “to provide armed support to the Afghan national army”. (Lyahovsky & Zabrodin, p.47)

In 1988, Izvestiya quoted general Boris Gromov, the commander of Soviet troops in Afghanistan:

“We came to Afghanistan at the end of 1979 at the request of the lawful government [of Afghanistan] and in accordance with the agreement between our countries based on the... Charter of the United Nations.” (Izvestiya, July 2, 1988)

Soviet journalists consistently supported these claims. Pravda and Izvestiya wrote in 1980 that Soviet forces were in Afghanistan “at the request of the [Afghan] government with the only goal to protect the friendly Afghan people” (Pravda, March 16, 1980) and “to help [this] neighbouring country... to repel external aggression”. (Izvestiya, January 3, 1980)

Such views were frequently expressed by Soviet elites and mainstream journalists. The 1980 issue of *International Annual: Politics and Economics*, published by the Soviet Academy of Science, observed that the Afghan government “repeatedly asked the USSR” to provide “military aid”. The “Soviet government granted the [Afghan] request, and the limited contingent of Soviet troops was sent into the country,” *Mezhdunarodnyi Ezhegodnik* noted (1980, p.208). Such actions were entirely in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter and Article 4 of the [Soviet-Afghan] Treaty of December 5, 1978, *Ezhegodnik* added. (1981, p.224)

Soviet leaders and commentators criticised and debated, not the fundamental *illegality* of the invasion, but the merit of the *strategies* for achieving its goals.

Soviet Chief of General Staff Ogarkov argued in 1979 (before the invasion), that the decision to send troops to Afghanistan was “inexpedient” because the initial invasion force of 75,000 was insufficient to the task, which was to “stabilise the situation in Afghanistan.” It was “impossible to achieve this goal with such a [small] force”, he claimed. (Quoted, Lyahovsky & Zabrodin, 1991, p.59). General Gareev, a top Soviet advisor to the Afghan armed forces, argued in his memoirs that “from the military point of view, it was perhaps more advisable to conduct a more massive and powerful invasion of Afghanistan”. (Gareev, 1996, pp.45-46)

In the 1980s, the invasion was seen by many Russians as a “mistake” rather than a crime. The attack was deemed legal and well-intentioned, but poorly executed and at excessive cost to the *Soviets* - a view that is commonly held to this day. Apart from extremely rare exceptions describing Soviet “participation in the Afghan war” as “crim-

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inal” (Trud [Labour] newspaper, January 22, 1992), the invasion has almost never been described as an act of Soviet aggression.

When the US and UK governments talk of their “just cause” in Afghanistan they are essentially repeating the Soviet newspaper Izvestiya which quoted an Afghan official declaring that the Soviet and Afghan soldiers were fighting “for a just cause and happy new life for all Afghan people”. (Izvestiya, January 14, 1986)

Similarly, and almost exactly echoing Izvestiya, an Observer editorial commented in October 2006:

“The UK has responsibilities to the elected democratic government of Iraq, under a UN mandate. Britain must honour its commitments to its partners in Baghdad and in Washington.” (Leader, ‘Blair should heed the general’s reality check,’ The Observer, October 15, 2006)

While the manifest illegality of the 2003 Iraq invasion is presented by newspapers like the Observer as a kind of initial teething problem rendered irrelevant by a subsequent “UN mandate”, former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan takes a different view:

“The Security Council’s mandate was for us to help the Iraqi people. I don’t think one can say that the Security Council sanctioned the occupation of Iraq, it merely noted the occupation of Iraq and asked the UN to help the Iraqi people...” (Mark Disney, On The Edge, August 2007)

The only US/UK responsibility under international law is to leave.

Closely echoing Soviet performance, the US-UK media essentially never challenge the fundamental and obvious illegality of both invasions, focusing also on “mistakes”. Reviewing the situation in Iraq, Timothy Garton Ash wrote in the Guardian:

“... the question being asked here [Washington], even by staunch Republicans who share the president’s goals, is: why has the Bush administration been so incompetent?” (Garton Ash, ‘Iraq’s government has failed, but America’s isn’t doing so well either,’ The Guardian, September 6, 2007)

For Garton Ash, as for most Guardian commentators, the key issue is “incompetence”, not the supreme criminality that is the waging of a war of aggression.

On August 20, 2007, the New York Times website linked to an article titled, ‘The Good War, Still to Be Won,’ with the synopsis: “We will never know just how much better the fight in Afghanistan might be going if it had been managed more competently over the past six years.” (New York Times, August 20, 2007)

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This closely echoes Soviet media performance on the 1979 invasion, where there was also close to zero recognition of the illegality of the invasion, as described reflexively in the Western media at the time. Ironically, contemporary US-UK media are closely matching the Soviet propaganda they ridiculed in the 1970s and 1980s.

To their credit, the Soviet media did at least, on occasion, *mention* the issue of international law. In their book, *The Record Of The Paper*, Howard Friel and Richard Falk note that in the seventy editorials on Iraq that appeared in the New York Times from September 11, 2001, to March 21, 2003, the words 'UN Charter' and 'international law' never appeared. (Friel and Falk, *The Record Of The Paper: How The New York Times Misreports US Foreign Policy*, Verso, 2004, p.15)

We asked Hugh Sykes, a BBC journalist reporting from Baghdad, for his opinion on the issue of legality in relation to the invasion of Iraq. Sykes replied:

"The Americans et al always say they are here 'at the invitation of the democratically elected Iraqi government'.

"It certainly WAS an illegal occupation before the elections in 2005, but is it still illegal?

"I tend not to put phrases like that into reports because I think I should stick to reporting events and providing analysis when asked." (Email to Media Lens, September 9, 2007)

Imagine a comparable comment from a BBC journalist in the 1980s:

'The Soviets et al always say they are here 'at the invitation of the democratically elected Afghan government'. It certainly WAS an illegal occupation before... but is it still illegal?'

In fact, of course, Western reporters were never in doubt about the truth of the Soviet invasion. When we conducted a search of newspaper archives, we found, for example, dozens of media references in the 1980s to the Soviet "puppet government" in Kabul. The New York Times commented in 1988:

"Soviet troop withdrawal will leave behind a puppet Government whose ministries are laced with Soviet 'advisers.'" (A.M. Rosenthal, 'The great game goes on,' New York Times, February 12, 1988)

In February 1990, Tony Allen-Mills reported for the Independent:

"Many former freedom fighters have made their peace with the puppet government left behind by the departing Soviet army." (Allen-Mills, *Out of*

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Kabul: 'Why pride must not come before a Najibullah fall,' The Independent, February 19, 1990)

By contrast, the same newspaper reported of the Taliban in June 2006:

"Their focus is the 'puppet' government of Mr Karzai and its complicity in what is portrayed as the Western military persecution of ordinary Afghans." (Tom Coghlan, 'Karzai questions Nato campaign as Taliban takes to hi-tech propaganda,' The Independent, June 23, 2006)

Readers will search long and hard before they find an example of a news reporter describing the current Afghan government as a "puppet government" without the use of inverted commas.

As for the idea that BBC journalists avoid controversial "phrases" and merely "stick to reporting events", the day after Sykes' reply the BBC website observed:

"The surge was designed to allow space for political reconciliation..."
('US surge "failure" says Iraq poll, BBC online, September 10, 2007;
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/6983841.stm)

It is not, in fact, less controversial to suggest that the massive increase in US violence "was designed to allow space for political reconciliation", than it is to argue that the invasion was illegal.

Blaming 'External Interference'

A striking feature of Soviet media performance on Afghanistan was its focus on "external interference" - primarily US in origin - and the role of this interference in fuelling the war.

In 1988, Pravda reported that Afghan president Najibula had criticised this "interference in the internal affairs of Afghanistan". (Pravda, February 9, 1988) The newspaper failed to mention that the Soviet Union was itself guilty of illegal external "interference". Instead, journalists blamed the West for "pouring oil onto the fire of the Afghan conflict". (Pravda, February 22, 1987) Ignoring the fact that much of the fighting in Afghanistan was in *response* to the Soviet occupation, the media were also heavily critical of Iran and Pakistan.

Iran was criticised for "supporting the armed Islamic opposition" and for "sending its political emissaries and agents into the territory of Afghanistan". (Spolnikov, 1990, pp.104-105) Russian journalist Andrei Greshnov, who worked as a TASS correspondent

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in Afghanistan for eight years in the 1980s, describes in his book “Afghanistan: Hostages of Time” (2006) how for several years, starting in the early 1980s, he was tasked with collecting information on Iranian Shia infiltration across the Afghan border near Herat. Iranian influence was very tangible in Western Afghanistan and widely confirmed by the testimony of Soviet soldiers interviewed (by Lanine) over the last 20 years.

We wonder how the Western media would have reacted if, in response to claims that Tehran had supported the Afghan insurgency and resisted their illegal invasion, Soviet officials had proposed bombing Iran. One can only guess at the level of Western outrage and horror at such a clear example of Soviet aggression, if an attack *had* taken place. Presumably the press would never have tired of reminding us that the Soviets’ real goal in the region was control of oil.

The Soviet press also directed fierce criticism at Pakistan for training and aiding Afghan jihadis, and for providing “the bridgehead for an undeclared war against [Afghanistan]”. (Izvestiya, February 19, 1986) Readers were left with the impression that “external interference” and “terrorism” were the *only* reasons for the continuing bloodshed, with Soviet troops acting in self-defence to bring “stability” to Afghanistan. In most reporting, the Soviet role in sustaining the conflict was not even a consideration.

The Soviet media heavily emphasised that weapons captured by Soviet and Afghan troops “were manufactured in the USA, UK, Italy, Iran, Pakistan”. (Izvestiya, July 7, 1987) These arms were “arriving from Iran [and] Pakistan” (Komsomolskaya Pravda, March 4, 1987), and “exploding and shooting in Afghanistan, killing children, women, soldiers...”. (Komsomolskaya Pravda, January 14, 1986)

Closely echoing Soviet government propaganda, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said on October 25, 2007:

“Unfortunately the Iranian government continues to spurn our offer of open negotiations, instead threatening peace and security by... supporting Shia militants in Iraq and terrorists in Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories.” (‘US imposes new sanctions on Iran,’ BBC website, October 25, 2007)

As in the Soviet case, the US-UK media have heavily boosted the US-UK governments’ emphasis on “external interference”. A June 17, 2007, New York Times report observed:

“American forces have begun a wide offensive against Al Qaeda in

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Mesopotamia on the outskirts of Baghdad.” (Thom Shanker and Michael Gordon, ‘GIs in Iraq open major offensive against al Qaeda,’ New York Times, June 17, 2007)

The BBC’s Andrew North emphasised the same alleged enemy:

“10,000 US and Iraqi troops are taking part in an operation against al-Qaeda.” (North, ‘US launches major Iraq offensive,’ BBC Online, June 19, 2007;

http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/world/middle_east/6766217.stm)

Occasional glimpses of truth defy the rhetoric. The Iraq Study Group Report, published in December 2006, concluded:

“Most attacks on Americans still come from the Sunni Arab insurgency... Al Qaeda is responsible for a small portion of the violence in Iraq, but that includes some of the more spectacular acts.” (The Iraq Study Group Report, December 6, 2006; www.usip.org/isg/iraq_study_group_report/report/1206/iraq_study_group_report.pdf)

General Sir Richard Dannatt, the head of the British army, said of Iraq in September, 2007:

“By motivation... our opponents are Iraqi nationalists, and are most concerned with their own needs - the majority are not bad people.” (Richard Norton-Taylor, ‘Embrace returning troops, pleads army chief,’ The Guardian, September 22, 2007)

This was a remarkable comment - it is hard to recall any journalist ever contradicting government demonisation of the Iraqi resistance so completely. A more typical description was provided by senior ITN correspondent James Mates in June 2004, when he reviled the “determined and brutal terrorists” threatening Iraq, which was “now sovereign”. (ITN, 18:30 News, June 28, 2004) There is indeed hideous terrorism in Iraq, but British journalists generally find it simpler, more convenient, to include all insurgents in this category.

Reflexive demonisation of Iran is also, of course, a constant focus of media reporting. A New York Times article observed:

“U.S. Says Iranian Arms Seized in Afghanistan” (New York Times, April 18, 2007). These “new signs of interference by Iran have raised concerns about the obstacles to a stable and democratic postwar Iraq”. (“U.S. warns Iran

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against interference,” *The Sun*, Baltimore, April 24, 2003)

In similar vein, the *Observer* reported in August:

“The conflict in Helmand has morphed way beyond that of crushing the Taliban. The nightmare scenario has unfolded: the Helmand valley has mutated into a geopolitical battleground for jihadists, a bleeding ground for budding martyrs from across the globe.

“Convoys of Toyota Land Cruisers carrying holy warriors stream daily from Pakistan’s porous border to target British teenagers.” (Mark Townsend, ‘Afghan Conflict: It’s bleak and ferocious, but is it still winnable?’, *The Observer*, August 19, 2007)

An Independent leader commented:

“There must be an acceptance also that the Taliban will never be utterly defeated until they are denied a safe haven in the western provinces of Pakistan.” (Leader, ‘Politicians must accept the reality on the ground,’ *The Independent*, August 14, 2007)

The point is not that external support for the resistance in Afghanistan and Iraq exists, as it certainly existed for insurgents fighting the Soviets in the 1980s. The point is that, in contemporary Western media, as in the Soviet case, the non-Western source of “external interference” is reflexively condemned as illegitimate, while the legitimacy of US-UK “external interference” is simply assumed.

Patriotism and 'Backing our Troops'

In their speeches, Soviet officials regularly affirmed the military’s “deep belief in the noble cause of helping the friendly nation” of Afghanistan (*Pravda*, 15 May 1988), stressing that Soviet advisors were working “shoulder to shoulder with... Afghans”. (Zhitnuhin, & Likoshin, 1990, p.169)

One Soviet journalist claimed of Soviet political advisors:

“They went to Afghanistan with a sincere belief in the high purpose of their mission. For most of them this belief grew into a conviction.” (Zhitnuhin, & Likoshin, p.171)

The steady supply of media stories lauding the motivation and heroism of the troops on the ground reflected the high status of the military in Soviet society. The writings of most “embedded” journalists who spent time with troops were full of admiration and

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respect for all ranks from privates to generals. Even Gennady Bocharov, whose book on Afghanistan is full of harsh criticism of the Soviet system, presents a sympathetic account of Soviet soldiers, and also of Gromov, the commander of the Soviet occupation. Bocharov describes Gromov as a “charming general” with “more compassion than any priest” who, nonetheless, “as a regular army man... carried out his inhuman mission in Afghanistan with precision and efficiency”. (Bocharov, 1990, p.142)

Similar sentiments expressed towards front-line troops are found throughout Greshnov’s book and provide a striking contrast to his harsh critique of the Soviet military leadership. He describes how, on one occasion, his bonding with Soviet troops left him speechless with emotion.

These ties were naturally reflected in reporting by most journalists that depicted fighting men as brave and selfless, in many cases justifiably. But, more generally, the media’s emphasis on the heroism of individual soldiers helped bury the hidden, deeper truths, namely: the illegality and appalling destructiveness of the invasion.

Western journalism is of course similarly full of patriotic praise for troops under fire. As US tanks arrived in Baghdad and US troops prepared to topple a statue of Saddam Hussein, ITN’s veteran correspondent, Mike Nicholson, was positively gleeful:

“They’ve covered his face in the Stars and Stripes! This gets better by the minute... Ha ha, better by the minute.” (Tonight with Trevor McDonald, ITV, April 11, 2003)

Nicholson was describing the completion of an appalling act of aggression, a war that had been launched illegally. And as we commented at the time, even the troops draping the US flag over the face of Saddam Hussein’s statue quickly understood that this was a deeply offensive and foolish act.

Thus, also, the BBC’s version of events in Iraq:

“You can marvel at the Americans’ can-do spirit... in the [US] sergeant’s case the will to carry on comes from a sense of responsibility towards the people of Iraq.” (Mark Urban, ““Can-do” spirit of US troops in Baghdad,” Newsnight, May 17, 2007)

Another BBC journalist, Paul Wood, recently described his “journey through Iraq’s Sunni heartland with the soldiers of the 101st Airborne”. Wood concluded his article with these comments on the US forces:

“They must win here if they are to leave Iraq.

“Even if things are turning around, their local allies remain uncertain, the popu-

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lation divided, the casualties, although reduced, keep coming.

“There is much still to do.” (Wood, ‘Voyage into Iraq’s Sunni centre,’ BBC website, October 26, 2007; http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7063603.stm)

Despite all the deceptions, false pretexts, evident illegality, and evident motive of control of oil, Wood presented the occupation as a peacekeeping operation. This is indistinguishable from the performance of the totalitarian Soviet press in the 1980s.

Timothy Richard, a former soldier with Iowa Army National Guard, who refused to deploy to Iraq and became a war resister, writes:

“The problem with the media’s perception in the US, is what I’ve come to call the ‘cult of the soldier’.” (Email to Lanine, August 10, 2007)

Richard says that the media followed the government’s lead in creating the slogan “Support our Troops”, so that even opponents of the war felt obliged to conform.

Soviet critics of the Afghan war were also accused of a shameful lack of patriotism and a failure to support the troops. Thus, in 1988, *Izvestiya* quoted general Gromov’s reference to “irresponsible” comments by people who “doubt the heroic deeds” of Soviet soldiers: “Nobody, not a single person in our country, has the right to ruin the faith of young people in the sanctity of the military biography that wasn’t lived in vain.” (*Izvestiya*, July 2, 1988)

Invisible civilian casualties

The Soviet media completely suppressed the devastating consequences of the occupation for the civilian population of Afghanistan. On occasions when the cost of the war was discussed, it focused on the cost to the Soviet Union. It is estimated that 1.5 million Afghans (Bradsher, 1999) and 15,000 Soviets (*The New York Times*, February 16, 1989) died during the nine years of fighting. But the Soviet media had little interest in Afghan casualties. Aside from a tiny number of dissidents, few voiced concern for a civilian population that bore the brunt of the suffering.

Even during Gorbachev’s semi-liberal reforms of the late 1980s, discussion of Afghan suffering was strictly prohibited. Andrei Greshnov describes how he repeatedly wrote about Afghan civilian casualties in the monthly classified reports submitted by all TASS journalists to the Soviet leadership in Moscow (it was of course important for decision makers to know the truth of the situation on the ground). Greshnov recalls:

“The government *knew* the truth about the situation in Afghanistan, including about civilian casualties – I personally wrote about it. But such information was never allowed to reach the general public through the mainstream

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Soviet press.” (Phone interview with Lanine, August 8, 2007)

By contrast, Western journalists are largely unconstrained by state controls. And yet, in early January 2002, American writer Edward Herman estimated that media coverage afforded to the death of Nathan Chapman - the first and, at that point, sole US combat casualty of the invasion of Afghanistan - had exceeded coverage afforded to *all* Afghan victims of bombing and starvation. CNN Chair Walter Isaacson is reported to have declared that it “seems perverse to focus too much on the casualties or hardship in Afghanistan”. (Howard Kurtz, ‘CNN chief orders “balance” in war news,’ Washington Post, October 31, 2001)

The US-UK bombing of Afghanistan began on October 7, 2001. On September 19, 2001, the Guardian had reported forty deaths per day in Maslakh refugee camp to the west of Herat in Afghanistan, “many because they arrive too weak to survive after trying to hold out in their villages” as the threat of bombing shut down all aid convoys. By January 2002, Maslakh contained 350,000 people, making it the largest refugee camp in the world at that time. Aid agencies reported that 100 people were dying every day in the camp.

Occasional references to this disaster did appear. Between September 2001 and January 2002, the Guardian and Observer mentioned Maslakh a total of five times - an average of once per month. A Lexis-Nexis database search in May 2005 showed that Maslakh had been mentioned 21 times over the previous four years in all UK national newspapers.

On October 29, 2004, the prestigious scientific journal, The Lancet, published a report by researchers from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Al-Mustansiriya University in Baghdad, and Columbia University, New York: ‘Mortality before and after the 2003 invasion of Iraq: cluster sample survey.’ (<http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140673604174412/fulltext>)

The authors estimated that almost 100,000 more Iraqi civilians had died than would have been expected had the invasion not occurred. The report was met with instant (and as it turns out, fraudulent) government dismissals, and a low-key, sceptical response, or outright silence, in the media. There was no horror, no outrage.

Our media search in November 2004, showed that the Lancet report had at that time not been mentioned at all by the Observer, the Telegraph, the Sunday Telegraph, the Financial Times, the Star, the Sun and many others. The Express devoted 71 words to the report. A similar reception awaited the October 2006 Lancet study, which reported 655,000 excess deaths since the 2003 invasion.

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This, however, does represent a difference from, and improvement over, Soviet media performance, which suppressed almost all discussion of civilian casualties. The Western media does discuss casualties, but it consistently and heavily downplays the true cost of US-UK violence. As with the Soviet media, the concern is invariably for the cost to 'us'. Also, the suffering is inevitably portrayed as unavoidable - alternative action would have resulted in far worse suffering, we are told - or the result of 'mistakes' rooted in benevolent intentions.

A further difference is that the Western media system is to an important extent responsive to media activism - rational criticism *does* have an impact. However limited, this represents a valuable avenue for improving media performance.

The cost of leaving

In the 1980s, the continued presence of Soviet occupation forces in Afghanistan was justified on the grounds that leaving would result in an even bloodier civil war. In his speech, published in *Izvestiya* on February 10, 1988, Gorbachev asked:

“Are military clashes going to intensify after the withdrawal of Soviet troops? It is hardly necessary to prophesy, but... such a development can be prevented if those who are now fighting against their brothers will take a responsible position and try, in practice, to join peaceful reconstruction.”

The Soviet leadership claimed that they would leave Afghanistan only on the condition that “external interference stops” (*Pravda*, January 7, 1988) and that “the faster the pace of establishing peace on Afghan soil, the easier it will be for Soviet troops to leave”. (*Izvestiya*, February 10, 1988)

Again, the official position was echoed uncritically by the Soviet media. Writing of planned negotiations in Geneva on the future of Afghanistan, *Pravda*'s commentator Ovchinnikov stressed that “the cessation of external interference” in Afghanistan was a precondition that would “allow Soviet troops to withdraw”. He accused the US administration of avoiding positive solutions and stressed that the problem was “not the date of the beginning of the Soviet troops' withdrawal but the date of the stopping of American aid to [the mujahideen]”. Ovchinnikov literally repeated the official line that Soviet soldiers “will leave Afghanistan with a sense of duty accomplished when external interference stops”. (*Pravda*, January 11, 1988)

The journal *Mezhdunarodnaya Zhizn* commented:

“It is professed that as soon as we leave [Afghanistan], there will be a slaughter, slaughter, slaughter. My experience in Afghanistan indicates that,

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probably, there will be a civil war, [and] there will be fighting. This is an internecine war. When I was flying out of Afghanistan last year, I thought that after our withdrawal some part of NDPA would be wiped out by the vengeful Islamic movement.” (Prohanov, *Mezhdunarodnaya Zhizn* [International Affairs] #7, 1988)

In similar vein, the Financial Times wrote in April: “this grim situation could easily get worse - if the Americans pulled out too quickly, or set a deadline for withdrawal that simply encouraged their foes to wait them out Iraq could tip into a full-scale civil war”. (Leader, ‘No easy way out of Iraq Congress should not set an arbitrary deadline for withdrawal,’ *Financial Times*, April 11, 2007)

By contrast, *Moskovskie Novosti* argued that the rationale for staying had not been the whole story:

“The withdrawal of the Soviet troops raised a lot of defence problems for Afghanistan, but also opened the road for the solution of political problems.” (*Moskovskie Novosti*, May 21, 1989)

The 2004 BBC documentary, *The Power of Nightmares*, featured a 1987 debate between a Soviet journalist and commentator Vladimir Pozner (mistakenly identified in the documentary as a “Soviet spokesman in the US”), and American intellectuals, including Richard Perle, then Assistant Secretary of Defense. Pozner commented:

“I believe that we can get out [of Afghanistan], provided that no more aid is given to what people here call ‘freedom fighters’, and we call ‘counter-revolutionaries’. I believe that’s possible, provided that the United States is also interested in the same.”

Perle responded:

“Well, it’s not very complicated. They arrived in a matter of days, on Christmas Eve in 1979; they could be home by Christmas Eve, if they decided to leave Afghanistan and let the Afghans decide their own future. If you leave, the problem of support to the mujaheddin solves itself.”
(<http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/video1038.htm>)

Not quite the American position with regards to its own occupations today.

Soviet and Western media - similarities and differences

Western reviews of Soviet media performance generally patronise Soviet journalists as submissive, eager functionaries of a state propaganda machine. These analyses fail to

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take into account the extreme difficulty of reporting honestly from within a totalitarian system. Unlike Western journalists, Soviet reporters were extremely vulnerable and essentially powerless. In a society where everyone was “merely a cog in a gigantic state-party machine,” Bocharov writes, “journalists played the part of rivets. If the body of the machine vibrated, then every rivet had to vibrate with it. And not individually, but together”. (Bocharov, p.56)

Why did Russian journalists who had extensively covered the victims of US aggression in Vietnam just a few years earlier not try to expose the truth of Afghan suffering?

The fact is that some *did* try. This is made clear in the writings of Soviet journalists, two of whom (Andrei Greshnov and Sergei Bukovsky) Lanine recently interviewed by phone and email. For these journalists to even ask awkward questions was to place their careers in jeopardy. Those who were openly critical faced far more serious consequences.

Radio Moscow news announcer Vladimir Danchev famously called Soviet troops in Afghanistan “invaders” and “occupiers”, and even called on Afghans to continue their resistance. Danchev was quickly taken off air, investigated by the KGB, and forced to undergo psychiatric treatment (relatively mild punishment that reflected international awareness of Danchev’s plight. See: New York Times, May 27 and December 15, 1983).

Other Soviet journalists had little choice but to stick to the official line. In the 1980s, multiple layers of censorship strictly blocked all attempts to discuss Afghan civilian casualties. Bocharov describes (1990) how we was forbidden even from mentioning *Soviet* casualties (p.53) - to refer to the deaths of Afghan civilians was unthinkable. Articles by Soviet journalists from Afghanistan “were edited mercilessly”, Bocharov writes:

“The final touches would be applied in Moscow” by the civilian and military censorship. (pp.51-52)

In an email to Lanine (July 22, 2007), Bukovsky recalled how, in 1988, he published an article exposing the role of senior military incompetence in the deaths of Special Forces soldiers. Such courageous expressions of defiance were so unusual that Bukovsky was convinced he would be arrested along with the senior military censor, who Bukovsky describes as a “decent officer” who “fought hard with” him “for every word” in the published article. After the piece was published on July 14, 1988, Bukovsky and his censor expected officials to arrive and arrest them.

The arrest never happened, but the military censor was officially reprimanded and fell out of favour with his superiors. Bukovsky was interrogated by military counter-

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intelligence and his loyalty challenged. He was also strongly criticised for quoting a Soviet officer to the effect that Afghan insurgents “never leave their dead and wounded behind” - a comment that contradicted the official depiction of the Mujahadeen as “foul, blood-thirsty rogues”. “I was [literally] spat at” for writing that, Bukovsky recalls.

The relationship of the Western media to centres of power is very different. By comparison with Soviet media workers who, Bocharov emphasises, “wrote what they were *ordered* to [italics added]”, Western journalists have much greater freedom. And yet, crucially, the outcomes of media coverage on major themes - the illegality of launching wars of aggression, the fraudulence of alleged humanitarian motives, and the costs to civilian populations - are much the same. In both cases, a misinformed population was, and is, bombarded with “necessary illusions.”

Western media have presented the occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan from within strikingly similar frameworks to those provided by the Soviet government and media:

‘We’ (US-UK and the USSR) are acting in self-defence, out of good intentions, at the request of foreign governments and/or to spread democracy, while our enemies commit acts of aggression against us and the people we are trying to help.

‘Our’ goal is stability and peace - our enemies strive to intimidate through terror.

‘We’ act according to international law - our enemies are criminal, murderous, morally indefensible and guilty of “external interference”.

‘Our’ attempts to promote ‘values’ abroad are noble because inherently superior - our enemies’ values are medieval, irrational or non-existent.

The most revealing similarity is that the Western media fail, just as the Soviet media failed, to ask the most crucial questions:

By what legal and moral *right* did we invade in the first place?

Without exploring these fundamental issues, and without incorporating honest answers in frameworks of reporting, the media neglect their most important task - the task described by the courageous Israeli journalist Amira Hass: “to monitor power”.

Like the Soviet media, Western professional journalists adopt and echo government statements as their own, as self-evidently true, without subjecting them to rational analysis and challenge. As a result, they allow themselves to become the mouthpieces of state power. It is fundamentally the same role performed by the media under Soviet

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totalitarianism.

The consequences for the victims of Soviet and US-UK state power are also fundamentally the same.

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