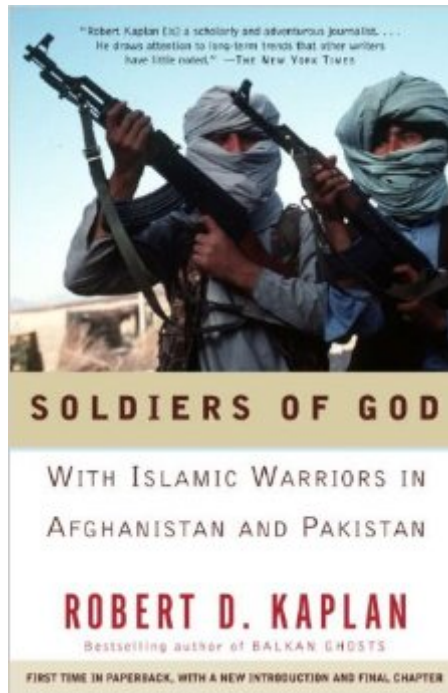


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Soldiers Of God: With Islamic Warriors In Afghanistan And Pakistan



Synopsis

First time in paperback, with a new Introduction and final chapter World affairs expert and intrepid travel journalist Robert D. Kaplan braved the dangers of war-ravaged Afghanistan in the 1980s, living among the mujahidin "the "œsoldiers of god" whose unwavering devotion to Islam fueled their mission to oust the formidable Soviet invaders. In *Soldiers of God* we follow Kaplan's extraordinary journey and learn how the thwarted Soviet invasion gave rise to the ruthless Taliban and the defining international conflagration of the twenty-first century. Kaplan returns a decade later and brings to life a lawless frontier. What he reveals is astonishing: teeming refugee camps on the deeply contentious Pakistan-Afghanistan border; a war front that combines primitive fighters with the most technologically advanced weapons known to man; rigorous Islamic indoctrination academies; a land of minefields plagued by drought, fierce tribalism, insurmountable ethnic and religious divisions, an abysmal literacy rate, and legions of war orphans who seek stability in military brotherhood. Traveling alongside Islamic guerrilla fighters, sharing their food, observing their piety in the face of deprivation, and witnessing their determination, Kaplan offers a unique opportunity to increase our understanding of a people and a country that are at the center of world events.

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Customer Reviews

Soldiers of God is a first-hand narrative of journalist Robert Kaplan's travels with the mujahadeen in Afghanistan during the waning days of the Soviet occupation. Set in the late 1980s, this book does not cover the more recent Taliban movement that will probably be of more immediate interest to

most readers. However, *Soldiers of God* does impart a clear understanding of the background conditions that led to the rise of the Taliban and the influence of Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan. *Soldiers of God* is the story of a third-world nation that was brutalized by the Soviets, then manipulated and mismanaged by the Pakistani agents who were acting as U.S. surrogates. Kaplan explains how the United States entrusted the Zia and Bhutto regimes of Pakistan with most of the day-to-day details of the war. The result was the gradual encouragement of the militant Islamist elements that would eventually coalesce into the Taliban. Tragically, Afghanistan was a comparatively minor sideshow in the Cold War. The country was difficult for journalists to enter, so the conflict was largely neglected by the American press; and Eastern Europe and Nicaragua were much higher on the list of U.S. priorities. Kaplan provides detailed accounts of Soviet atrocities which received little mainstream press attention at the time. However, the most captivating aspect of the book is richness of the narrative itself. Part diary, part political commentary, *Soldiers of God* gives the reader a visceral sense of what it was like to live as a mujahadeen during the Soviet-Afghan conflict. Kaplan describes the miserable climate, maggot-infested food provisions, and the constant fear of Soviet mines with exacting detail. Kaplan also gives us insights into the characters of the mujahadeen themselves.

September 11 offered an obvious answer to why Afghanistan mattered, and several books have examined the interaction between the Soviet war in Afghanistan and the rise of militant Islam. Last year, Steve Coll was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his book "Ghost Wars," a twenty-year history of America in Afghanistan. But save the exception of *Taliban* published by Ahmed Rashid, Afghanistan was consistently conspicuously absent from the Western booklist. When Robert Kaplan first published this book, in 1990, he meant to shed light into a war whose geopolitical importance was inversely related to its attention in the press. "Soldiers of God" is a typical Kaplan book that interweaves the author's first-hand account of the region with a deep interest in understanding its history and a solemn sense of realism that pervades the narrative. In telling his story, Mr. Kaplan begins with an introductory chapter on the war's barbarity—particularly the impact that Soviet mines had on the war and the country's landscape. He then looks at Peshawar, the Pakistani city that acted as the war's staging room, at least for the mujahedin side, before examining the tribal dynamics of the war, and specifically the Pathans' men relationship to their women. It is in chapter 3 that Mr. Kaplan makes his trip into Afghanistan and gives a first-hand account of the Khyber Pass that connects Pakistan to Afghanistan; from then on, the reader gets an intimate and intricate image of the war's first line of attack, just as the portraits of the mujahedin get enriched with more detail

and precision.

This is an extremely well-written book that covers many aspects of the mujahidin battle against the Soviets (and their Afghan proxies) in Afghanistan throughout the 1980's. Although Kaplan gives a disclaimer in his new forward that, "Soldiers of God is not a primer for current or future policy in Afghanistan," I disagree and think this should be at the top of the list for an easily digestible and insightful view into what it was like to be with the mujahidin then-- a view that is probably still applicable today. This was the third Kaplan book I have read. It differs from the other two (Eastward to Tartary and Balkan Ghosts) in that it is a more focused-- both geographically and in its narrative-- and Kaplan reveals a lot more of himself, especially in candidly revealing his weaknesses in trying to keep up with the muj. He also discusses his personal views and biases about faith, and how those views evolved after observing the muj he was with exercise their beliefs and faith in a simple, noble fashion. Kaplan was lucky enough to have fallen in with a group of "good" muj-- they took care of him and earned his admiration-- he admits this bias. Even back then, however, the more fundamentalist groups were extremely hostile and the sinister designs that would culminate in the catastrophic events of 9/11 were developing. Kaplan's insights from that era are just as relevant today. Many of the same characters are still running around, and the struggle is in many ways similar-- an element of the population revolting not just against the foreign influence, but also against the Afghan government and its forces. Overall, this is an excellent book to read if you want to understand the motivations and intricacies of this conflict, which still rages today.

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