

THE HOLY WARRIOR

**OSAMA BIN LADEN AND HIS JIHADI
JOURNEY IN THE SOVIET-AFGHAN WAR**

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Series in World History



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For my beautiful bride, endless love, and forever queen, Grazielle

For my awesome number one Mom, Rebecca, and my wonderful in-laws and
Brazilian father and mother, Vanderlei and Suzel

For Eissa Nasraldeen, M.B.A., truly a brother, now, always, and forever

For the courageous men and women warriors of the U.S. Army, Marine Corps,
and CIA, the republic's best, brightest, and most uncredited defenders

PREFACE:

Osama bin Laden in the Soviet-Afghan War – an introduction

“Knowledge comes only from God, the Mighty One, the Wise One.” - Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah – An Introduction to History: The Classic Islamic History of the World*¹

In late 1979, Soviet forces invaded Afghanistan to bolster an unpopular communist regime and crush a growing resistance movement of Islamic guerrillas calling themselves *mujahedin*. As a result, the leaders of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, North Yemen, the United States, and Britain launched a program of limited financial and material support for the Afghan insurgency. As the fighting spread, thousands of devout young men from Arab nations began gathering in Pakistan to offer their support to their Afghan coreligionists. Prominent among these volunteers, a wealthy Saudi named Osama bin Laden persuaded Afghan insurgent leaders to allow his small Arab band to face the Soviets. Bin Laden's subsequent actions as a guerrilla fighter and leader helped to launch al-Qaeda as a deadly and well-trained insurgent organization.

In the decades since the 9/11 terror attacks successfully drew U.S. and UK troops into Afghanistan, scholars have produced a multitude of works analyzing bin Laden's life, including his exploits in the Soviet-Afghan War. After learning that bin Laden and other Arab volunteers had fought the Soviets in Afghanistan, I became fascinated with this topic and authored a short high school paper on it in late 2001. A lifelong fascination was born, and my passion continued to grow as I devoured numerous books and articles about bin Laden and al-Qaeda that emerged in the decades after 9/11, researching various aspects of the topic until earning my M.A. in History in 2017.

This book is the culmination of my lifelong interest in bin Laden and my desire to produce a readily available and original monograph to help explain the significance of his wartime experiences fighting the Soviet occupation forces in Afghanistan in his rise to prominence as a historical figure. Born in 1985, I grew up as part of what is sometimes known as “Generation 9/11,” defined as those who were between the ages of 10 and 20 years old at the time of the 9/11 attacks and began saving my money and buying books about the al-Qaeda leader after starting work at my first job as a teenager. My interest only grew with time as I learned more, leading to my decision to write the dream book on this topic that I envisioned rather than pursue publication in a journal.

Bursting with ideas and refusing to put off my dream of pursuing the topic of my true historical passion any longer, I finally sat down and began writing the first chapter of this book during my second semester as a Ph.D. student at the University of North Texas (UNT) in April 2020.

From the moment of his 1996 declaration of war on the United States and its European allies until his much-deserved 2011 death, bin Laden consistently and ruthlessly demonstrated al-Qaeda's position as the deadliest threat to Westerners and their security. It therefore remains unfortunate but necessary for me to point out that by focusing this book on his wartime anti-Soviet exploits, I am not in any way, shape, or form seeking to praise him, but to help improve scholars' understanding of his true motivation and still lethal legacy. As the native of a small, sleepy southern town in the United States, my fascination with bin Laden as a historical figure, irrespective of positive or negative connotations, has always been and remains strictly historical in nature. The qualities that he possessed according to most of the primary sources consulted for this work, including those authored by critics that turned against the al-Qaeda chief for various reasons, appear to have led others to follow him and transformed him into an uncompromising and vicious foe of those he deemed the enemies of Muslims.

Bin Laden's own statements, those of his closest former associates, and the excellent books written by those whose expertise has contributed many remarkable findings on the al-Qaeda leader's life have proved to be invaluable sources. Housing many of bin Laden's additional statements, as well as those by Afghan, Soviet, and Western leaders, the digital and online archival collections of *The Wilson Center*, *The National Security Archive*, *The Bukovsky Archives*, the *Congressional Record*, the *Parliamentary Record*, and the *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point* have also proved to be equally invaluable. In writing and researching this book, I have also located many detailed and informative newspaper reports, journal articles, and other primary and secondary sources that were readily available. All these sources proved to be indispensable to this book's development as I consulted them while completing my required classwork and began studying for my doctoral dissertation on a separate and unrelated topic between spring 2020 and fall 2021. The work that I have hopefully produced here, aided only by the many sources that I have cited and the moral support of the very few loved ones who were aware of my project, has resulted in the completion of this book and the realization of a lifelong dream.

From my perspective, the biographies of bin Laden authored by Peter Bergen, Steve Coll, and Michael Scheuer served as the most informative of the numerous secondary sources cited in this book. Peter Bergen's 2001 book *Holy War, Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden*, a *New York Times*

Bestseller, is the first book that I read on bin Laden's life after I became interested in this subject in my late teenage years. Throughout the work, Bergen emphasizes the ways in which al-Qaeda is organized along the lines of a multinational corporation and pays close attention to bin Laden's actions, including two chapters discussing his role in the Soviet-Afghan War.²

Bergen rebuts some claims by another early bin Laden biographer, Yossef Bodansky, arguing that the earlier author erred in his 1999 book *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America* by describing the al-Qaeda leader as a violent, womanizing drunkard in Beirut during his teenage years and later ally of Iran that settled in London, a, "fantastic assertion" that Bergen points out is contradicted by the accounts of those closest to bin Laden at the time and later.³ Bergen also briefly visits bin Laden's motivation to attack the United States, arguing that the bulk of primary source evidence indicates that the al-Qaeda leader sought to fight those he regarded as oppressing Muslims through specific policies rather than attacking Americans for their secular, democratic freedoms.⁴ In his outstanding 2006 book *The Osama bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of al-Qaeda's Leader*, essentially a primary source collection including many of bin Laden's own statements, Bergen provides scholars with a detailed look at the words of those that knew the al-Qaeda chief, including the accounts of several of his former anti-Soviet comrades.⁵

Steve Coll's 2004 book and Pulitzer Prize winner *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*, also discusses bin Laden's anti-Soviet activities much like Bergen's *Holy War, Inc.* Like Bergen however, Coll largely focuses on the al-Qaeda leader's later war with the United States, while providing invaluable information on his interactions with Afghan and Arab militants during the war against the Soviets.⁶ In another Pulitzer Prize-winning 2008 book *The Bin Ladens: An Arabian Family in the American Century*, Coll appears to part with Bergen by inferring bin Laden to have been a cowardly participant seeking to avoid combat in the Soviet-Afghan War, an assertion also popularized by other authors including Lawrence Wright, Abdullah Anas, and Rob Schultheis.⁷ Coll then contradicts this statement by arguing that during his first taste of battle in 1987, bin Laden fought, "honorably" and earned his place among the Islamist zealots fighting the Soviet occupation forces.⁸

Out of all these fantastic biographical accounts that have emerged, I have found Michael Scheuer's 2011 biography *Osama bin Laden* to be particularly well-researched and authoritative, especially regarding bin Laden's actions in the Soviet-Afghan War. Scheuer's bin Laden biography appears to be the most thoroughly researched of these excellent works, relying heavily on the words of bin Laden and his closest associates, including some previously untranslated documents and unavailable material.⁹ Characterizing bin Laden's time fighting

the Soviets as a holy warrior, “apprenticeship” alongside the Palestinian-born Islamist scholar *Shaykh* Abdullah Azzam, Scheuer emphasizes the militant educational value of the al-Qaeda chief’s early years as a jihadi.¹⁰

Focusing much of the book on bin Laden and al-Qaeda’s war on the United States and the West in the manner of previous scholars, Scheuer nevertheless provides an informative portrait of his subject’s years as a guerrilla volunteer in the Soviet-Afghan War. He revisits and emphasizes Bergen’s earlier argument regarding bin Laden as a deadly threat but rational operator focused on striking those perceived as attacking Muslims while caring very little about the perceived debauchery of Western culture.¹¹ Scheuer also rebuts the allegations of bin Laden behaving in a cowardly fashion during the Soviet-Afghan War suggested not only by Steve Coll but by Lawrence Wright in the latter’s 2006 book *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*.¹² Scheuer points out that while the primary source for Wright’s claim, the former Algerian jihadi Boudejema Bounoua, known as Abdullah Anas, knew bin Laden during the Soviet-Afghan War, he also quickly became his enemy and sought to discredit him after the al-Qaeda chief won control of Azzam’s fundraising and militant recruitment networks.¹³ Citing the accounts of men that fought alongside the al-Qaeda leader including some that became his harsh critics after tactical disagreements or alleged pressure and lucrative offers from the Saudi and other Arab regimes, Scheuer points out that all eyewitnesses appear to agree that bin Laden acquitted himself bravely in battle.¹⁴

Indeed, Anas admits in his 2019 memoir *To the Mountains: My Life in Jihad, from Algeria to Afghanistan* that while he met bin Laden at the time, he never participated in the engagements in which the al-Qaeda leader reportedly fought, opting to fight alongside the Afghan commander Ahmed Shah Massoud in northern Afghanistan instead.¹⁵ While providing a valuable eyewitness account of the Soviet-Afghan War including a brief, passing encounter with bin Laden in his 2008 book *Hunting bin Laden: How al-Qaeda is Winning the War on Terror*, the journalist Rob Schultheis also appears to imply the al-Qaeda chief as a coward in battle.¹⁶ Like Anas, Schultheis does not appear to have been present at the battles in which bin Laden is said to have participated.¹⁷ This stands in contrast to the primary accounts by men such as Abdullah Azzam, Saudi cleric Musa al-Qarni, former Yemeni jihadi Tariq al-Fadhli, and former Egyptian journalist and military intelligence officer Isam Darraz, all battle participants attesting to the al-Qaeda leader’s combat actions.

The statements of bin Laden and the memoirs and interviews of his closest associates have also collectively produced a goldmine of information on the impact of the Soviet-Afghan War on al-Qaeda’s martial origins. Foremost among these firsthand accounts and second only to bin Laden’s words, the written and oral statements of Musa al-Qarni, Tariq al-Fadhli, bin Laden’s first

wife and fourth-eldest son, Najwa and Omar, his former bodyguard Nasser al-Bahri, and his childhood friend Khaled al-Batarfi serve as the absolute best primary sources to date. Of all these invaluable primary accounts, I have found Nasser al-Bahri's 2010 memoir *Guarding bin Laden: My Life in al-Qaeda* and Najwa and Omar bin Laden's 2009 memoir *Growing Up bin Laden: Osama's Wife and Son Take us Inside Their Secret World* to be especially courageous and remarkable in their honesty.

The outstanding quality of these memoirs, along with the interviews of al-Batarfi, al-Fadhli, and al-Qarni, is further enhanced by the fact that their authors have reportedly lived and worked under daily pressure from regimes staunchly opposed to bin Laden and yet still openly acknowledge his wartime record and effective leadership skills. While each of these authors has contributed invaluable information, none have yet produced a book focusing exclusively on bin Laden's wartime role as a *mujahid* or "holy warrior" fighting the Soviets. This book's original contribution lies in its focus on his life and actions in the Soviet-Afghan War and the practical training in combat and insurgency support that he and his lieutenants received courtesy of their unwitting Soviet foes.

This is a book about bin Laden's participation in guerrilla warfare and rise to prominence, about his transformative and arduous journey from a resistance financier, engineer, and fighter to a tactical combat commander. His battlefield exploits transformed him into a respected insurgent leader in the multinational Arab contingent fighting in Afghanistan, propelling him to hero status in his native Saudi Arabia and triggering the birth of al-Qaeda. Bin Laden's successful efforts to assist the beleaguered Afghans and acquire combat experience for his Arab guerrilla unit were enabled by the ongoing fighting resulting from the prolonged Soviet military occupation of Afghanistan.

Fearing the potential rise of a fundamentalist Sunni version of neighboring Iran's Shia Islamic Revolution or U.S. and Pakistani military involvement, Soviet leaders from Leonid Brezhnev to Mikhail Gorbachev desperately sought to stabilize Afghanistan's communist central government to crush the resistance fighters.¹⁸ Frustrated by the Soviet Army's failure to achieve a decisive victory and sufficiently bolster the regime's security, they waged a limited campaign often executed through brutal means in hopes of ending an increasingly costly and destructive war.¹⁹ As a result of the insurgency's resilience, Soviet leaders were repeatedly forced to delay their army's withdrawal, and their generals served as the unwitting instructors for the leaders and foot soldiers of al-Qaeda by providing a key window of opportunity for the Arab fighters to obtain battlefield experience.

This intense practical training, acquired by their eager participation in guerrilla warfare against the Soviet troops, enabled bin Laden and his

lieutenants to launch al-Qaeda as a battle-hardened insurgent organization, steeled in combat and capable of training others. In addition, the perseverance of bin Laden's guerrilla unit in the battles fought between 1987 and 1989 appears to have inspired militant Islamists worldwide and triggered an immense boost in jihadi recruitment efforts. As Gorbachev and the Soviet Politburo began withdrawing their troops, bin Laden and al-Qaeda prepared to channel their rich combat experience in a guerrilla campaign to aid local Islamists in eventually expelling all remaining infidel forces from Muslim countries.²⁰

It may seem odd to the reader that despite the dozens of books written about bin Laden and al-Qaeda since the 9/11 terror attacks, no author until now has focused a single monograph on the group's origins and activities in the Soviet-Afghan War. I have found this puzzling for years, given the considerable amount of material available on this subject and the war's impact on training the al-Qaeda top brass militarily. While several authors have alleged that the Arab fighters received CIA training and have blamed the agency for "creating" al-Qaeda, the historical record reveals a far larger factor in the group's rise resulting from practical combat experience.

The Soviet invasion itself created the opportunity for the Arab fighters to obtain this crucial training, providing militant Islamists worldwide with the traditional Koranic justification for a *Faridat al-Jihad* or "holy war of resistance" against the infidel occupiers.²¹ For many Westerners, memories of the 1980s conjure up images of Nelson Mandela and the end of *apartheid* in South Africa, nuclear war scares, or summits between Ronald Reagan and Gorbachev. While these events were remarkable, Afghanistan is often treated as a Cold War sideshow by scholars overlooking the Islamist awakening in the Sunni Muslim world triggered by the Soviet invasion.

Perhaps this is the reason why Western historians, until now, have yet to produce a work focusing primarily on bin Laden's role in this conflict that gave birth to al-Qaeda and the global jihadi movement. In writing this book, I have sought to produce an original work by exploring the topic of the war's impact on training al-Qaeda, dispelling many of the false assumptions about the group's origins along the way. In addressing several misconceptions about the role of bin Laden and his Arab guerrilla unit in battle, I hope to help ignite a discussion and open the way for future research into this fascinating topic in the history of the world.

For many people, history is little more than a hobby. For me, it is a passion, a profession, and an art. As I sit down to indulge this passion by opening a book or beginning to write, my mind calmly wanders into another world. Current global affairs, controversies, and concerns disappear, and the lives of people and cultures far away illuminate my mind. Studying history professionally is

not for everyone. It takes a great deal of patience, dedication, and an acknowledgement that one's research and findings may not be understood or appreciated either by colleagues or much of the broader public. This is especially true for historians specializing in what may someday receive recognition in our field as "Bin Laden Studies." As one such person, I have also found that the study of history comes with great rewards in the form of the personal satisfaction of researching topics, cultures, and historical figures that continue to fascinate me.

Focusing on the role of prominent individuals in history remains somewhat of a controversial subject among scholars. In some ways, this controversy results from a popular misinterpretation of the "Great Man" theory of history, a nineteenth-century concept stating that individuals with natural talents or social influence determine the course of world civilization. Part of the reason for this controversy is the assumption of many people, scholars and students alike, towards a profession often stereotyped as the study of kings, queens, "old dead white guys," and events that transpired centuries ago.

Since graduating with my M.A. in History from the University of Louisiana at Monroe (ULM) in 2017, I have had the pleasure of pursuing my lifelong dream of teaching history and doing my part to break this and other negative perceptions about the field. As I have often taught my students, history is something far larger than most people assume, and I hope that they take this lesson with them as they continue their academic careers as college students and members of the U.S. military. History is a journey, an unfurling ribbon that continues to paint and shape the present, just as the present will someday be classified as history and inevitably impact the future.

Yet none of this is possible without the human element, the key role of individual men and women in determining the course of events. While there is certainly much more to history than the mere study of great individuals, the actions of such people complete the puzzle of our world's past as scholars seek to connect every piece. While economics and impersonal social forces certainly matter, it is people that make the crucial difference. Contrary to popular assumptions, great figures arise in all social classes, religions, and cultures, and do not necessarily hail from the ranks of royalty or even hold economic or political power. Nor are all such world-changing individuals great in a positive sense, a somewhat subjective perception in and of itself.

This book is intended first and foremost to serve as a teaching tool and to enhance the previous findings of the experts by refocusing the historiographical conversation surrounding the origins of bin Laden and his al-Qaeda unit on their actions in the Soviet-Afghan War. In particular, the book theorizes that Moscow's invasion and the opportunity to fight the world's greatest military machine at that time provided bin Laden and his lieutenants with the training

that they needed to launch al-Qaeda and prepare it for later struggles. By focusing on this psychological and physical battle baptism of the Arab fighters, the book also serves as a cautionary tale regarding the strengthening of local jihadi groups as an unintended result of counterproductive military interventions in traditional Muslim societies.²²

Other theories regarding the origins of al-Qaeda are also addressed in the book, particularly the claim that the Arab fighters enjoyed the support of the West as their Afghan hosts did. Although this book's subject is highly specialized in many ways, I have sought to make it accessible to all interested readers with the intention of producing a readily available book answering the "how and why" of bin Laden and al-Qaeda's martial origins. I trust that the book's findings have produced a focused but approachable work on bin Laden's beginnings and the birth of al-Qaeda that may prove valuable to students of history and casual readers alike.

PROLOGUE:

The war that made the modern world

At 7:00 a.m. on the morning of 25 May 1987, 30-year-old Osama bin Laden watched in awe as a Soviet MiG-27 “Flogger” ground attack plane suddenly broke apart while falling helplessly from the sky above his mountaintop base overlooking the valley of Jaji.¹ Afghan insurgents had landed a parting shot as they withdrew from the area, inspiring bin Laden and his lightly trained Arab unit to hold their ground and fight the advancing Soviet onslaught themselves. In the ensuing battle, the 70-man guerrilla band faced merciless attacks by 200 Soviet troops, including elite *Spetsnaz* commandos.

As the Soviet assault began, the zealous, inexperienced young men braced for martyrdom at the hands of their foes, a chance to die fighting in God’s path. Instead, during the months that followed, they received intense practical training in conducting a determined resistance against the forces of a superpower. For bin Laden and his lieutenants, the Battle of Jaji served as the ultimate test of leadership, management, and insurgency combat skills as holy warriors defending besieged Muslims from infidel invaders.

The conflict that propelled bin Laden to prominence and trained al-Qaeda in guerrilla warfare began almost a decade before the defiant stand of the Arab fighters at Jaji in the spring and summer of 1987. The Soviet-Afghan War began as a civil war within Afghanistan and escalated into an international conflict involving the Soviet Union, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, North Yemen, the United States, Britain, and thousands of jihadi volunteers from dozens of Islamic countries. Initially planning to withdraw quickly after Soviet forces equipped and trained a new and more reliable Afghan Army and regime, Brezhnev reportedly expected all resistance to crumble quickly in the face of the Soviet Army’s overwhelming preponderance of mechanized forces and airpower.² Lasting more than a decade, the ensuing conflict destabilized much of South Asia, accelerated the Soviet Union’s collapse, and motivated the birth of the modern Salafi jihadi movement and its multinational guerrilla vanguard, al-Qaeda. In short, it may reasonably be concluded that the Soviet invasion and subsequent war in Afghanistan helped to usher in the modern world.

More than a decade after his long overdue death, courtesy of the U.S. Navy SEALs acting on CIA intelligence, bin Laden remains an example of one such historical figure whose legacy continues to damage U.S. and Western security interests. Born into a wealthy and pious Saudi family of Yemeni origin, bin Laden decided on a life-changing course of action following the Soviet invasion

of Afghanistan in December 1979, eventually changing the world. Rather than limiting his support of the besieged Afghan Muslims to charitable work as many wealthy Saudis initially did, he embraced the Spartan lifestyle of a mujahid, rejecting a billionaire's life of luxury as advised by the medieval Arab scholar Ibn Khaldun.³

Bin Laden won the respect of his Saudi and Yemeni compatriots and the Afghan and Pakistani border tribes due to his willingness to sacrifice worldly riches and match his beliefs with actions. While this basic fact has been documented in several books, most notably in former CIA officer and historian Michael Scheuer's indispensable biography *Osama bin Laden*, this book reexamines the impact of the specific interactions and events that propelled the al-Qaeda chief to prominence. The accounts of bin Laden's associates, especially those of his son Omar, anti-Soviet colleagues Tariq al-Fadhli and Shaykh Musa al-Qarni, and former bodyguard Nasser al-Bahri provide useful windows into the Soviet-Afghan War's impact on al-Qaeda's martial growth.

Among other aspects of bin Laden's actions in the Soviet-Afghan War, this book emphasizes the significance of practical combat on his Arab unit that served as the forerunner to al-Qaeda between his establishment of a guerrilla base for Arab fighters in October 1986 and the group's participation in the rebel assault on Jalalabad in 1989. The book also emphasizes the importance of the connections that bin Laden forged with the Afghan warriors and the impact of Washington's Afghan policy in unintentionally provoking Islamist resentment. While researching this topic, I have found that several of the dates often associated with the intense Jaji battles of 1987 have been inaccurately documented in previous secondary accounts. In the interest of historical accuracy, I have sought to provide the correct dates of these key engagements that propelled bin Laden to leadership by a careful check of the Muslim *Hijri* calendar dates for 1987 (or 1407 *Hijri*) listed in the primary sources.

I have also included a chapter on the historical origins of the Salafi jihadi movement embraced by bin Laden and his closest associates during their youth in Saudi Arabia. By doing so, I hope to clarify the key role of religious fervor in inspiring the founding fathers of al-Qaeda to bear arms against a superpower once perceived as invincible by many people worldwide. This deep religious conviction spurred bin Laden and his comrades to action and distinguished them as warriors in a society whose clerics called for holy war but displayed a noticeable reluctance to join the guerrillas on the battlefield.

I also hope to encourage current and future scholars to explore these engagements in further detail to provide students of history with a greater understanding of al-Qaeda's formation. The book also addresses many of the popular assertions of CIA support for the Arab fighters and assesses the documented impact of U.S. and Saudi material aid to the Afghan resistance.

Following a detailed assessment of the Arab guerrillas in combat between 1987 and 1989, I have included a chapter on the subsequent civil war fought between various factions in Yemen in 1994. This conflict provided bin Laden with a second opportunity to test al-Qaeda's combat capabilities acquired while fighting the Soviets. It also allowed him to strengthen al-Qaeda's connections in a largely rural and tribalized society dear to his heart as he and his lieutenants prepared to launch their war against the West.

Bin Laden based his strategy to engage the United States and its allies that he regarded as Islam's foes on his Arab guerrilla unit's practical experience fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan.⁴ As the war that he twice declared on the United States, Britain, and Israel in 1996 and 1998 remains far from over even a decade after his death, Americans and their allies must continue to arm themselves with detailed knowledge of their most determined enemies.⁵ Only by understanding the origins of their martial skills can we hope to decisively defeat them in the present and thereby safeguard our future.

From a mud hut in Afghanistan in a 28 May 1998 interview with former *ABC News* journalist John Miller, bin Laden predicted a day of societal and political division and disunity in the United States not unlike the collapse of the Soviet Union after its defeat in Afghanistan. Bin Laden warned Miller that, "We predict a black day for America and the end of the United States as the United States, and it will become separate states and will retreat from our land and collect the bodies of its sons back to America, God willing."⁶ Bin Laden ruthlessly labored to draw U.S. forces and their allies into Afghanistan to make this day a reality, successfully inflicting more damage on U.S. security interests than any individual since Robert E. Lee. Bin Laden and his lieutenants mastered their fighting skills during fierce battles with the Soviet troops, just as the Mexican-American War (1846-1848) trained Lee and his officers for their later rebellion against the American Union.⁷ Al-Qaeda's leaders successfully emerged as battle-seasoned insurgent commanders courtesy of the unwitting Soviets, just as the Army of Northern Virginia's officers received their battle baptism, more effective than any West Point education, on the Mexican battlefields.⁸ Bin Laden concluded that Allah had provided a blueprint for defeating far superior forces through uncompromising patience, faith, and determination, as well as the practical training in conducting a ruthless guerrilla war to eventually emerge victoriously.⁹

I also hope that the book will call readers' attention to the key role of individuals in history and clarify the importance of understanding bin Laden's vicious and lethal anti-Western legacy while emphasizing the ability, even of those holding no official title or government post, to make an impact on world affairs, whether positive or negative. While I focus on the impact of the Soviet invasion and subsequent war in Afghanistan in tactically training the militants

in the art of guerrilla warfare, I also want to emphasize the role of bin Laden's personal characteristics, skills, and leadership example. His decision to act on his militant convictions and lead his comrades on the frontlines served as the key factor in propelling him to leadership in the international jihadi movement triggered by the Soviet invasion.

In many ways, readers may find my thesis in this book to be comparable to the scholarly school of thought emphasized by Karl Marx in his 1852 masterpiece *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, a work focusing on Napoleon III and the events that propelled his rise to power. Arguing that existing social conditions in mid-nineteenth-century France "created circumstances and relationships that made it possible for a grotesque mediocrity to play a hero's part," Marx concludes that great individuals arise and shape history by cleverly channeling events outside of their control to their advantage, essentially taking control of the situation.¹⁰ Influenced by Marx's findings, Russian revolutionary leader Vladimir Lenin later spoke of a "vanguard of the revolutionary forces in our time," subsequently demonstrating that even a small, determined group led by committed zealots can impact history as he and his comrades seized power in the world's largest country.¹¹

While I have not sought to portray bin Laden as playing "a hero's part," or in any way praise his actions, readers will notice that I also view him as having been far from a "grotesque mediocrity," as Marx describes his subject.¹² Whether positive or negative, such opinionated portrayals of the late al-Qaeda leader do not move scholars any closer to an accurate understanding of his true motivation and his still lethal legacy as reflected in the primary sources. Had bin Laden either proven to be a mediocre leader or overinflated his wartime role by crediting the small number of Arab guerrillas that fought the Soviets with victory rather than their Afghan hosts, it seems unlikely that he could have won the respect and comradeship of both Afghan and Arab militants. This book seeks to provide readers with an informed understanding of how and why bin Laden succeeded in taking control of the situation presented to him and applying the martial skills that he and his senior lieutenants acquired fighting the Soviets in establishing al-Qaeda's deadly legacy of inciting Islamist insurgencies through training and guerrilla support operations.

Through al-Qaeda's vicious terror attacks on U.S. interests in the 1990s, the 9/11 attacks, the 3/11 attacks in Madrid, Spain in March 2004, and subsequent terror attacks in London, Paris, and elsewhere, bin Laden demonstrated an ability to impact Western governmental policies and public perceptions of those policies despite being one man commanding a small organization. Like Lenin, bin Laden worked to establish a militant vanguard, not for leading an immediate revolution in the Western sense, but for inspiring a protracted,

multigenerational struggle to motivate aspiring jihadis to acquire the training and fighting experience necessary to overthrow Muslim regimes perceived as corrupt or tyrannical. By skillfully acting within the existing framework of events far outside of his control, bin Laden succeeded in forging global connections and acquiring combat experience in command of a small Arab guerrilla band while fighting the Soviet troops. His successful mission enabled the vanguard organization that he and his comrades subsequently founded to export their improved combat skills to jihadis elsewhere, while eventually drawing U.S. and NATO forces into Afghanistan and winning another 20 years of practical battle experience for new generations of Islamist militants.

While his family's wealth and status initially enhanced bin Laden's reputation and enabled him to secure financing for the Afghan cause from other wealthy Saudis, his decision to join his guerrilla comrades in the trenches against the Soviet troops seems to have propelled him to leadership in their ranks and helped him to command their respect and build a following. Saudi society remains dominated by thousands of royals, all of whom are far wealthier than the bin Ladens, and reportedly even look down on them as ethnic Yemenis from modest origins.¹³ Yet few of these royals or their regime clerics appear to have been prepared or willing to risk their earthly pleasures and comforts for the arduous Afghan mountains and face the Soviets' cold steel and hot lead.

Bin Laden's initiative to act on his beliefs and to match them with deeds earned him the respect of Afghan and non-Afghan Islamists alike, and highlights the importance of individuals, even those holding no official power or public office, in making a historical impact. Along with the reluctance of many of the Saudi regime's clerics to act on their own professions of faith, bin Laden's leadership example demonstrates that finances and impersonal social factors contributed very little to the respect that he commanded and the militancy that he inspired. Rather, as Marx states of Napoleon III, bin Laden's willingness to display initiative by cleverly working within existing conditions that he could not control propelled his rise to prominence, enabling him to manage the situation and forge a history-shaping guerrilla vanguard in battle, transforming him into a deadly adversary.¹⁴ If readers of this book can walk away with some understanding of these conclusions, I will feel that I have succeeded in my efforts to teach about one of the most significant events and individuals in the contemporary history of the world.

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The bulk of the research in this book is drawn from the numerous excellent biographies of bin Laden, the memoirs of his closest associates, many of his own written and oral statements, and several courageous firsthand accounts of the Soviet-Afghan War. Every source that I have cited here has proved indispensable in researching this book, yet several specific works have proved to be especially crucial and informative, and their authors and producers deserve special mention here. In my view, these are the following individuals, in no particular order: Peter L. Bergen, Michael Scheuer, Nasser al-Bahri, Allia Ghanem, Carmen, Najwa, and Omar bin Laden, Dr. Khaled M. al-Batarfi, Tariq al-Fadhli, Steve Coll, Jonathan Randal, Robert D. Kaplan, Shaykh Musa al-Qarni, Debra Denker, Camille Tawil, Abdel Bari Atwan, Rahimullah Yusufzai, John Miller, Robert Fisk, Scott MacLeod, Abdul Salam Zaeef, Edward Girardet, Anne Stenerson, Mohammad Yousaf, Radek Sikorski, Paul Kengor, and Ali Ahmad Jalali. I respectfully disagree with some of the things that they have written, and they may utterly reject what I have written here. Having said that, each of these authors has produced absolutely invaluable work in the biographies, memoirs, interviews, and eyewitness accounts that are cited in this book and these works, having helped to make mine possible, are highly recommended to readers.

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Note: The article “al-” is ignored in alphabetization. For example, “al-Qaeda” appears under the Qs and “*al-Raya*” appears under the Rs, while surnames such as “al-Bahri” and “al-Fadhli” appear under the Bs and Fs, respectively.

Note: Readers will notice that I use the term “Soviet Army” rather than the more popular term “Red Army” throughout this book. This is because the Soviet government changed its army’s name from the “Red Army” to the “Soviet Army” in February 1946 and this remained the official title of the Soviet Ground Forces until the Soviet regime’s collapse in 1991, although many people worldwide, including Osama bin Laden, frequently used both names, or a combination of them, in reference to the same military force.

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