

Book Review

Rahman, Tariq. *Pakistan's Wars: An Alternative History*. 364pp. Routledge 2022.

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If war is said to be too serious a business to leave to generals, then writing a military history is certainly too important to be left to retired generals. There must be something about professors of linguistics. Perhaps it's their unusual ability to analyse and dissect difficult subjects that has produced Noam Chomsky in the US and Tariq Rahman in Pakistan. I learnt some years ago that anything written by any of them on any subject was going to be thought-provoking, intellectually stimulating and well researched. I have yet to be disappointed by either of them. Professor Rahman has probably the most interesting CV of any Pakistani academic, given his early days as a military officer and three Masters degrees and a PhD in Literature. He is without doubt the leading linguistic scholar in Pakistan but has also written knowledgeably on Jihad in South Asia and the origin of family names in Pakistan amongst other topics. This is a serious and important work but also it is also deeply personal and moving. As wars become more 'real' thanks to the profusion of cameras and recording devices, the visceral horror of reality of war is now far more visible to the public than ever before. For any former soldier, however, that is not news and in many nations which value collective memories, the desire to avoid the horror of war is obvious. For Pakistan where the military have dominated almost every sphere of public life including the historical narrative, Pakistan seems unable to break out from its militaristic approach to human and political issues.

Professor Rahman's latest work is entitled: *Pakistan's wars: An Alternative History*. This book is alternative without doubt and the title is masterly in its understatement. It looks unflinchingly at the human cost of war on the families of soldiers who were casualties, it looks at the army's decision-making capabilities and limitations, and is generous in acknowledging other important oral histories.

No history or political study of Pakistan can be taken seriously unless it deals head on with the 'army question'. It is the proverbial elephant in the room and one that some writers

tiptoe around. Not this book and not Professor Rahman. Since the country's birth in 1947, the army has probably been the single biggest factor in every type of government that has been tried. It has ruled directly for more than 30 years and indirectly for pretty much the rest of the time. It has made and broken governments, hogged national and natural resources and turned Pakistan into an effective security state where enemies, both internal and external, can only be handled through military means. There are so many problems with this approach that it is hard to know where to begin but not least is the problem, as Professor Rahman points out, that the army seems like the Bourbons in Talleyrand's famous phrase to have forgotten nothing and learnt nothing. The same old strategic errors, failure to plan and bravado in place of strategic thinking, has left the army unable to claim a single real victory in any of its operations since 1947.

Amongst the many advantages that Professor Rahman has over many writers is that as a former soldier, other former soldiers and their families are willing to talk to him, and also that he has a better understanding of an organisation than those whose study is purely academic. He acknowledges the frankness with which some of the former soldiers and their families were willing to speak to him.

Pakistan was born in violence and the old British Indian Army which had helped Britain preserve its empire as well as protect the Raj itself was by 1947 around 400,000 strong. Of these soldiers, India received 260,000 men and Pakistan 140,000. Almost as soon as the horror of the massacre of minorities and refugees began to fade than the dispute over Kashmir began between the two countries. Neither wanted to let it go to the other for religious and strategic reasons and that conflict has blown hot and cold between the two countries to this day and for the foreseeable future. It was this dispute more than any other which politicised the Pakistan army from the outset. Without repeating the well-known chronology of the Kashmir dispute, the fact remains that when in October 1947 the

Governor-General of Pakistan, Mr Jinnah, asked the head of the Pakistan army, a British general, to move into Kashmir, the order was refused and the government of Pakistan was forced to rely on some Muslim officers of the army and irregulars to fight. This led to some soldiers being involved in what were essentially political questions and also led to a sense of betrayal amongst a few of those soldiers when a ceasefire with India was finally agreed to begin on 1 January 1948.

One of those who was politicised by the first Kashmir war was General Akbar Khan who although senior to General Ayub Khan was passed over as the choice of the first Pakistani Army Chief. Ayub Khan was seen as more pliable and less political than Akbar Khan. The fact that Ayub Khan went on to declare martial law in 1958 and rule till 1969 should have been enough to warn people that appointing an army chief on the grounds of his pliability or loyalty was misplaced. In fact, this went on to become a repeating pattern in Pakistan as appointing army chiefs in the hope they would be pliant or non-political has led to at least three more incidents where prime ministers were sent packing by the same army chief they had appointed.

The 1950's saw Pakistan the willing recipient of large-scale US military aid. This was made possible by India's neutrality in the new Cold War between the USA and USSR and Pakistan's willingness to join the US camp in exchange for financial and military aid. By the early 1960's Pakistan was feeling bullish with the influx of new US weaponry and India was apprehensive of Pakistan's new weapons. This Indian nervousness was compounded by its poor showing against China in 1962 – something which emboldened Pakistan further.

As is so often the case, dictators and military rulers often lose touch with reality and begin to believe their own propaganda. By 1965, Ayub Khan seemed quite convinced that a swift war limited to Kashmir would be won by Pakistan and India would have no choice to accept reality. Why a soldier thought his opponent would fight by his rules is a mystery but the Indian retaliation for Pakistan sending troops into Kashmir in the summer of 1965 was to attack Lahore on 6 September 1965. This led to a three-week war in which the Pakistan army has been largely successful in persuading the country's population through school textbooks, music and official channels that Pakistan was the moral victor of the 1965 war by holding off a larger and devious enemy. That was of course not true and Professor Rahman dispels whatever doubt there might be by describing the way the Pakistan army planned (if that is not too generous a term) guerrilla incursions into Kashmir during the summer of 1965 and failed to achieve any of its objectives before having to agree to a ceasefire. He describes not only the human cost to Pakistani soldiers' families but also the experience of Indian soldiers and prisoners of war. It is this kind of detail and angle which makes this book so different and important.

The next war the Pakistan army found itself in was the conflict in East Pakistan/Bangladesh in 1971. This is as close to a taboo topic in military circles in Pakistan as it gets but again, Professor Rahman doesn't flinch or hold back. There are numerous eyewitness accounts and testimonies from Pakistani soldiers and civil servants that show how the fatal combination of bigotry, racism and arrogance led to mass rapes, massacres and a humiliating defeat in a war which barely lasted two weeks. This chapter is difficult but necessary reading for all Pakistanis but particularly for all military personnel. There is even a discussion of whether the actions of the Pakistan army amount to genocide. He does not come down one way or the other but points out that the scale of the human suffering was shocking enough for the exact numbers to be irrelevant. The 1971 war for Pakistan was a military disaster, human tragedy and moral catastrophe and this book deserves full credit in not shying away from the most difficult and taboo subjects.

If 1965 was a stupid war and 1971 a humiliation, then the conflict between the Pakistani and Indian armies over Siachen can best be described as pointless. Both sides have spent millions of dollars and thousands of lives to seek a supposed strategic advantage on some glaciers and mountain ridges. If one rule of the Pakistan army can be almost assured, it is that as soon as the last war is over it will try and plan for another unwinnable adventure. The idea of institutional memory or learning any lesson from past wars seems to an alien concept to the "Boys in Pindi" (as GHQ is often referred to in Pakistan). General Pervez Musharraf was appointed by the then prime minister Nawaz Sharif in October 1998 and lost little time in putting his own strategic plan into action in the winter of 1998/99 when Pakistani soldiers were sent onto glaciers that Indian troops had abandoned for the winter. As is now a common pattern for the Pakistan army, this plan was not known even to all the generals of the Pakistan army; only to a small clique. As wisely said by a genuine military genius, few battle plans survive contact with the enemy and this plan had far less than chance than others. Musharraf and his small clique were convinced that the Pakistani troops would be able to hold their new positions and even threaten Srinagar – the capital of Jammu and Kashmir. The Indians reacted as any sensible observer knew they would; by sending their troops in force to reclaim all the territory occupied by Pakistan. The usual Pakistan army play book came out: the initial stage of bravado, followed by a sober realisation that things were not going according to plan followed by panic and a desire to end the war. The other common elements to Kargil were the extreme secrecy of planning where even GHQ was not fully aware of what was going on, the political leadership kept in the dark and poor planning based on over-optimistic assumptions (all of which proved to be incorrect). Professor Rahman records eyewitness accounts of how each peak was desperately fought over with heavy casualties on both sides and how professional soldiers admired their opponents' tenacity.

Military studies rarely discuss war and gender but, as the title says, this is an alternative look. Professor Rahman spends time discussing issues such as military rapes, the human loss of a soldier on his family and the issue of refugees caused by conflict. In talking to wives of soldiers, the book concludes that women are not at all the blind supporters of war that are portrayed in official narratives and some even said openly how much they hated war. This being Professor Rahman, there is also a fascinating chapter on how the male psyche operates in a military environment.

Professor Rahman makes it clear that he considers the current jingoism, glorification of violence and lack of deep strategic thinking and planning to be a tragedy for Pakistan and it is hard to disagree with him. This book has many highly original insights, anecdotes and possible solutions for it to be ignored by anyone who has an interest not only in Pakistan but war studies in general. If rumours are correct and every army officer in the Pakistan army above a certain rank has to read a few books a month, then this should be on the compulsory reading list.

The book ends with a plea that one day the world may see an end to wars. Despite some horrific recent and on-going conflicts, the world is more peaceful than in preceding centuries and so one can only hope this trend continues. Any right-minded person must share Professor Rahman's fervent hope that one day war will be a study for historians and not contemporary polymaths.
