

Review – White as the Shroud

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White as the Shroud: India, Pakistan and War on the Frontiers of Kashmir

By Myra MacDonald

Hurst Publishers, 2020

A number of contentious issues have marred relations between India and Pakistan since the partition of the subcontinent in 1947. However, the conflict over the control of Siachen glacier, ongoing since 1984, stands out both in terms of terrain as well as cost. The information about the conflict in the glacial region until now is very scant. The details about how the conflict started, what sustains it and how it is being fought are relatively low, as previously researchers have focussed on the on-going conflict prevailing in the Kashmir valley (See Schofield 2010; Wirsing 2004; Verghese 2004, Bose 2003). MacDonald's insightful book *White as the Shroud* is written in light of this conflict and aims to find a new way of looking into the Kashmir dispute from the periphery. The book is based on interviews with the soldiers and military officers on both sides of the Indian and Pakistani controlled side of the glacier, as well as her fear-defying personal visits to the glacier. The book is divided into sixteen chapters and brings a whole new perspective on this war fought on the peripheries of these countries by focusing on Ladakh, Siachen, soldiers, contested borders, border wars and the Kargil conflict of 1999 in which both countries lost several hundred to a thousand men and triggered fears of a nuclear war across world, after both had gone nuclear just a year before.

The book begins with a historical introduction of the Ladakh region, the largest part of the erstwhile princely state of the Jammu and Kashmir, where the Siachen glacier is located at the tri-junction of the India, Pakistan and China border, in the eastern Karakorum of the mighty Himalayas. Ladakh was once a staging point on the network of tributaries that fed the silk route and its history was of greater openness, shaped by many empires and bigger powers. The author traces the history of the region in a chronological manner under various kingdoms and sheds light on past disputes, agreements, ancient trade and the fluidity of borders. The book subsequently traces the history of the region in light of the partition and the creation of two new nations (India and Pakistan), as well as the inheritance of a colonial legacy. The war of 1947-48 over Jammu and Kashmir led to the split of the princely state between India, Pakistan and China. India ended up with control over the largest portion of territory, Gilgit and Baltistan, parts of the Ladakh went with Pakistan, while China annexed the Aksai Chin region, over which it also fought a war with India in 1962 and inflicted a humiliating defeat on the later.

MacDonald's work offers a chronological sequence of events outlining how the Karachi agreement of 1949 and the Shimla agreement of 1972 between India and Pakistan failed to define the ceasefire line from point NJ9842 to the China border, as the glacial region was initially considered inhospitable and wild terrain. However Pakistan permitting foreign climbers to explore the Siachen glacier from its side rang alarm bells in India, which declared it as a "cartographic aggression" after the climbers marked the glacier as a Pakistani controlled area. The error also originated in maps prepared by the U.S defence mapping agency which extended the ceasefire line straight up to the Karakoram pass, Pakistan reproduced these maps later showing Siachen as its territory, causing fears in India that Pakistan would use Siachen to link-up with Chinese troops in the Shaksgam Tract and the contested Despang Plains near the Karakoram highway. In a series of actions and counter-reactions, India landed troops on the glacier on 13 April 1984, under the operation code named Meghdoot (Cloud Messenger) beating the Pakistani side by weeks, which had intended to land its troops on the glacier in the month of May in operation Ababeel. Pakistan later occupied the Saltoro Ridge which separates Siachen from the Pakistan Controlled Kashmir. It is actually here where

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the war is fought. The north eastern wall of the glacier which forms a part of the Karakoram mountains, separates the Siachen from territory held by China where the Trans-Karakoram Tract which is controlled by China and claimed by India, becomes another source of conflict between these countries.

MacDonald argues that war in Siachen is completely different from the other wars, which are defined by the terrain, transport and supplies. Here both sides face great difficulty in maintaining control over these inhospitable terrains, which often defy the logic of war. This war was sustained by the longest, highest and most expensive airborne operation in the world. The author also notes the accounts of soldiers, who served or were serving at the glacier at the time of her visits and captures their experiences of the place and the life changing effects it had on them. She declares it as one of the deadliest battlefields of the world, where soldiers suffer enormous hardships both physically and psychologically and where weather kills more people than the bullets of the enemy. The book also provides detailed information about the small battles fought by the two armies for the control of posts, which will lend them strategic advantage over the opposite side, like the battle over Quad Post and Rana and Akbar posts. Pakistan also landed its troops on Chumik glacier, one of the glaciers on the Pakistan side of Saltoro, after fearing that India was planning another misadventure, but subsequently withdrew the troops after the ceasefire between the two in May 1989 when both sides decided not to occupy it again despite the talks failing to find any solution to the Siachen conflict which is divided by the Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL) between the two countries.

MacDonald also explains the inter-connection between the Siachen war and the Kargil war of 1999, given the geographical proximity between the two. Pakistan's failure to take control of the glacier led them to come out with another master plan which was retributory in nature. In 1999, Pakistan sent its troops across the Line of Control triggering another short term war with India. The war created further mistrust and animosity between the two countries and made the troop withdrawal from the Siachen completely impossible, as both sides developed strong apprehensions of the other side taking control of the area after they demilitarize it.

The book could be strengthened in two areas. First, it doesn't touch on or mention the environmental impact of the Siachen conflict, given the war is being fought in a highly sensitive glacial region and the melting of glaciers will put millions of lives at risk across South-Asia. Second, the book doesn't use maps to define the fault lines, which would have made it easier for readers to better understand this war and the geographical complexities of the region. However, this in no way overshadows the significance of the book.

MacDonald notes the perspectives on war from both sides and emphasizes how the understanding of it varied significantly, such as the nature of access, topography, areas of conflict, and deep suspicion of the other side. She also underlines how these big mountains over which the war was being fought are ill-suited to fixed or linear borders or to a military approach that aimed to defend every inch of land. The war over Siachen according to the author started as an incident rather than the extension of politics by other means by the two countries and was sustained by nationalism. This book is important for anyone interested in understanding high-altitude warfare, geo-political complexities, military adventurism and the history of Siachen conflict. It also explains the absurdity and futility of fighting a war over this hostile terrain, where it is not possible for any of the two countries to win it, because these mountains do not have any smooth cartography. The fighting here has much to do with a lack of confidence and national insecurities of these countries, along with defining the borders running through them.

About the author:

Aijaz Ashraf Wani teaches at the Department of Political Science, University of Kashmir. He is author of **What Happened to Governance in Kashmir?** (Oxford University Press, 2019) and co-editor of **Government and Politics of Jammu and Kashmir** (SAGE, 2022).