

BERKLEY CENTER
for Religion, Peace & World Affairs

GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

Film Guide

The Beast

June 2013



Abstract

This film guide focuses on the concept of Pakhtunali—the “code of honor” of Pashtun culture—as depicted in the 1988 film *The Beast*, a story set amidst the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan (1979-1989). *The Beast* depicts several themes concerning religion and conflict that are just as relevant today as they were thirty years ago, including hostility to religion, suspicion of cultural differences and those who sympathize with those differences, forgiveness, and revenge. This guide consists of a synopsis of the film, a section on the historical context of the events depicted therein, a list of key terms, discussion questions, and transcripts of important scenes of particular relevance to the topic of Pakhtunali.

About this Film Guide

This film guide was crafted under the editorial direction of Eric Patterson, visiting assistant professor in the Department of Government and associate director of the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University.

This film guide was made possible through the support of the Henry Luce Foundation and the Luce/SFS Program on Religion and International Affairs.

Contents

Synopsis	4
Historical Context	5
Key Terms	6
Discussion Questions	6
Transcripts of Key Scenes	7

Citation

Title: *The Beast*

Rating: R¹

Original Release: 1988

Run Time: 110 minutes

Actors: George Dzundza, Jason Patric, Steven Bauer, Stephen Baldwin, Don Harvey

Director: Kevin Reynolds

Writer: William Mastrosimone

Producers: John Fiedler

Language: English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese with English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, Korean, and Thai subtitles

DVD Release: 2001 (Sony)

¹ This movie is a contemporary war movie, with graphic violence and adult language. The selected scenes are appropriate for a college-level course, but the instructor should read the scene transcripts (below) and watch the scenes prior to classroom viewing.

THE BEAST (1998)

SYNOPSIS

The Beast is a film directed by Kevin Reynolds and is based on a William Mastrosimone play called “Nanawatai.” The movie was released while the Soviet Union invasion in Afghanistan was just coming to an end and as a result, there was little American interest in the film, which was reflected in its low box office numbers.

The Beast takes place during the second year of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which ended in 1989 with a military stalemate and the continuation of civil strife in Afghanistan that is still felt today. The film follows a group of Soviet soldiers whose tank inadvertently breaks away from a Soviet armored brigade in the middle of the Afghanistan desert. A group of Afghans witness this and, furious at the destruction of their village and their people at the hands of the very men in that tank, spend the remainder of the film tracking the tank to destroy it.

The plot centers on a Soviet T-62 tank separated from its brigade after destroying an Afghan village. Konstantin Koverchenko, a young Russian soldier, is caught between his country and his conscience when his merciless commander destroys a village in the opening sequence. In an attempt to elicit information from an Afghan rebel, the commander orders his men to place him in front of a tread of the tank and has Koverchenko slowly run him over. Soon thereafter the tank becomes separated from the rest of the Soviet brigade and is trapped in a pass near that village. Surviving Afghan rebels from the same village realize the tank is alone and vulnerable to attack—their attack. The Soviet commander executes one of his men, an Afghan named Samad, because he suspects him to be a traitor; despite the fact that Samad was educated in the Soviet Union and had proven his loyalty many times over. Koverchenko had bonded with Samad and has a strong reaction to his murder.

Quickly, the commander labels Koverchenko a traitor as well and orders the tank crew to tie him to a rock to be left for dead. He is found first by Afghan women who begin to stone him, followed shortly thereafter by the rebels. Koverchenko pleads: “*Nanawatai*” (sanctuary). He learned from his Afghan comrade that in the Afghani culture there is a code honor that demands an enemy be fed, clothed and protected if he asks for sanctuary. These are the key scenes for this film guide and classroom discussion. From here on in the movie, Koverchenko allies himself with the Afghan men chasing the tank and pledges to help destroy the tank.

As the remaining three members of the tank crew begin to realize they are trapped in the valley, a Soviet helicopter appears and offers to rescue them. The commander, caring more for his tank than his men, refuses the offer and simply refills the vehicle’s oil and gasoline. They get their bearings from the helicopter pilot and head back into the narrow mountain pass from which they came, looking for the way out of the valley. Ironically, they later return to a water hole to cool the tank’s engines, and find the helicopter crew dead; they all drank from the small pool that the tank crew had poisoned with cyanide earlier. The mujahedeen and Koverchenko catch up with the tank crew, and a cat-and-mouse chase begins near the mountain pass, culminating in an opportunity for Koverchenko to disable the tank with a rocket-propelled grenade. Koverchenko fires as the tank is going out of range, but hits only the main gun. Just as it seems the tank will escape, an explosion in the cliffs above the tank sends boulders in front of and on the tank, disabling it at last. The village women set off the explosion.

The tank crew is forced out and Koverchenko pleads *nanawatai* on their behalf. The Afghan village leader reluctantly agrees. Koverchenko asks the tank commander—who survived Stalingrad—how it is that the Soviets are now the Nazis and then

tells him he wants the commander to live to see the Soviets lose the war. Some of the crew escape, but the women catch up with the commander and carry out their revenge by killing him. Meanwhile, a rescue helicopter appears and despite the camaraderie that has developed between Koverchenko and the rebel leader, Koverchenko goes with the helicopter. The Afghan leader stops his men from firing on Koverchenko as the helicopter is hoisting him up. Koverchenko salutes the leader by holding the musket just given to him by the Afghani above his head and the film ends with Koverchenko being flown away, the musket still in his hand.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Saur Revolution in April 1978 saw the overthrow of the unpopular centrist government of President Mohammad Daud Khan by leftist military officers led by Nur Mohammad Taraki, who ascended to the presidency. Two Communist political parties—the People’s (Khalq) Party and the Banner (Parcham) Party, originally both part of the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan—shared power in the new government and, under Taraki’s leadership, quickly enacted reforms that proved highly unpopular among the traditional Islamic and anticommunist majority of the people, including land reform and equal rights for women. With little popular support, the Communist Afghan government purged domestic opposition from the population and formed a strong alliance with the Soviet Union to secure its hold on power. Armed insurgents rose up against the Communist government in both tribal and urban areas. These rebels, known as mujahideen, were motivated in large part by their Islamic faith.

Dissension was not limited to the mujahideen. Rivalries between the People’s Party and the Banner Party led to infighting and coups within the Communist government. Unwilling to lose its new strategic ally and client state, the Soviet Union invaded the country on December 24, 1979 with a force of 30,000 soldiers, toppling President Hafizullah Amin of the People’s Party and securing Communist rule under Banner Party leader Babrak Karmal. Resistance to the foreign-supported Communist government continued to grow as the United States began providing support to the mujahideen in order to topple Soviet power. The Afghan army, which the Soviets had hoped would take the lead in suppressing the uprising, suffered mass desertions, rendering it ineffective.

A stalemate soon ensued that would persist for the duration of the Afghan War—over 100,000 Soviet troops held control of the cities while the mujahideen operated and moved with relative freedom throughout the countryside. When traditional military tactics proved largely futile against the guerrilla operations of the mujahideen, the Soviets employed harsh tactics in attempts to crush popular support for the rural insurgency, bombing the countryside to depopulate rural areas. By 1982, nearly 3 million Afghans had entered Pakistan as refugees, and 1.5 million more sought asylum in Iran. However, this depopulation did little to suppress the insurgency. Shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles, supplied in large part by the United States, eventually allowed the mujahideen to neutralize the Soviets’ ability to carry out air strikes.

Though their insurgency proved unbreakable for the Soviets, the mujahideen were always fragmented along political and tribal lines and never coordinated their military efforts. Due to the material and financial assistance of countries opposed to Soviet power—the United States and other Western governments—and countries sympathetic to the Islamic motivation behind the rebellion—Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and others—the mujahideen’s weaponry and logistical abilities improved throughout the war. The Afghan mujahideen were also joined by a number of Muslim volunteers from across the world who heeded calls to defend Islam from atheistic Soviet rule. Still, these foreign fighters—collectively known as “Afghan-Arabs” regardless of their particular ethnicities—had relatively little interaction overall with the local Afghan mujahideen.

As the years passed, the stalemate in the Afghan War became a quagmire for the Soviet Union, which was itself starting to disintegrate by the late 1980s under increasing domestic opposition to Communist rule. After nine years of fighting and 15,000 Soviet deaths, the Soviet Union began withdrawing troops in 1988, completing the withdrawal process on February 15, 1989. With the Soviets having failed to establish a tenable sympathetic government in Afghanistan, the country returned to nonaligned status. Because the various mujahideen forces had never united, and because Soviet-backed Afghan President Mohammad Najibullah was able to maintain power over the central government until 1992, the civil war that had triggered the Soviet invasion ten years earlier continued after their withdrawal.

KEY TERMS

Identify and discuss the following:

Taliban

Allah

Mujahedeen

Jihad

Islamists

Pakhtunali

President Mohammad Daud Khan

Nur Mohammad Taraki

Hafizullah Amin

Babrak Karmal

People's (Khalq) Party

Banner (Parcham) Party

People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the background wherein *The Beast* is set—the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Who was fighting and what were their goals? How did the armies and insurgents conduct themselves, and what does this say about their respective levels of dedication to the particular cause they were fighting for?
2. What are the themes of *The Beast* and how do they apply to contemporary warfare?
3. In scene III, the captain gives Koverchenko the order to crush a rebel with the tank. What causes the tension that ensues between the captain and Koverchenko, and what wider set of issues are involved?
4. Neither side of the invasion trusts Samad; discuss what Samad's character symbolizes, and the implications of both sides' rejection of the cultural bridge he serves as.
5. Discuss *Pakhtunali* and its tenets. To what extent is *Pakhtunali* Islamic in nature, and to what extent is it simply a part of Pashtun culture? Do other faiths or cultures have similar codes?

TRANSCRIPTS OF KEY SCENES

SCENE 10: CODE OF HONOR

Show the class the first half of Scene 10: Samad is sitting with Koverchenko around a fire explaining the principles of Pakhtunali—the Pashtun people’s code of honor.

Follow up with the next scene with Koverchenko begging for mercy while tied to a rock.

Samad: It is called *Pakhtunali*. It’s the code of honor.

Koverchenko: *Pakhtunali*.

Samad: Yes. Three obligations. First, “*Milmastia*,” hospitality

Koverchenko: *Milmastia*.

Samad: Second, “*Badal*,” revenge.

Koverchenko: *Badal*.

Samad: Third, “*Nanawatai*.” The obligation to give sanctuary to all those who ask.

Koverchenko: To all?

Samad: All. (*Nods*)

Koverchenko: Even the enemy?

Samad: All.

Koverchenko: What if I kill your brother and you come for *Badal*, revenge. And I ask for *Nanawatai*?

Samad: Then I would be obligated to feed, clothe and protect you.

Koverchenko: That’s incredibly civilized. What is it, *Nanawatai*?

Samad: Na-na-wuh-TAY.

Koverchenko: Na-na-wuh-TAY.

Samad: Bread? (*Offers some in hand. Koverchenko accepts and starts eating.*)

Commander Daskal: Smells like he’s been chewing on f---ing buffalo sh--. (*Climbs into tank*)

Koverchenko: When we get back, you gotta transfer out of this tank.

Samad: I’ll win his respect in time.

Koverchenko: Listen to me. When the old man gets on your back there’s no way to shake him off.

Samad: My dear Konstantin. I regard this abuse as the price I must pay to learn. I love Afghanistan, but we are a flea in the tail of a bear. We must join the twentieth century. And when Afghans accept that, I will be there. Knowing technology and Russian.

Koverchenko: So, you’re a patriot?

Samad: Yes.

Koverchenko: So was that rebel. He wanted to keep things the way they’ve always been. I wish I believed in something that much. I envy him.

Samad: Then why did you crush him?

Koverchenko: Because I had no choice.

Samad: You always have a choice.

[The Code of Honor content ends here for this scene; the rest of the scene contrasts the idealism of Samad and Koverchenko with the weaknesses of the rest of the tank crew.

The instructor should skip ahead to the rock scene.]

Kaminski: Give it. You never told me she sent nudes of herself. Give it to me. She's got that nympho look. *(He and another Russian soldier wrestle for a photo)* Well, I got the half I want. *(Soldiers resume wrestling and Konstantin breaks them up)* You son of a bitch. Get the f--- off me. *(Pulls a knife and Konstantin kicks dirt in his eye)*

Commander Daskal: What the hell is going on?

Koverchenko: Nothing, sir. *(Picks up torn picture and gives it to Golakov)*

Golakov: Thanks, Konstantin.

Commander Daskal: *(Pulls bottle Kaminski is holding and sniffs it)* What is this? *(Drinks it and immediately spits it out)* Break fluid?! No wonder they don't work.

Kaminski: It keeps me steady on the gun, sir. I filter it through bread, you know, to get out all the sh--. Then I put in raisins and sugar, I put it out in the sun. It ferments in a few days. Gets a pretty good kick. *(Daskal throws him to the ground)*

Koverchenko: Write him up, sir?

Commander Daskal: Get over here. *(Koverchenko walks over)* For one mistake? He's the best gunner in the division. Omit it.

Koverchenko: It's already done, sir. In ink. *(Commander tears out paper and climbs back into tank)*

Kaminski: You'd better watch your ass from now on, Koverchenko. *(Snickers)* Sometimes Afghan snipers pick off tank drivers.

Koverchenko: Sometimes tank drivers pick them off first, Kaminski.

Kaminski: Really?

(Grenade bounces off tank)

Golakov: GRENADE!