

The soviet invasion of afghanistan



The Soviet invasion was futile in terms of advantages and eventually lethal. It demoralized their troops, punctured the economy and instead of ensuring stability within the Soviet sphere, it instigated their downfall. Furthermore, the role of the United States of America cannot be overlooked, as the CIA funneled weapons and money to Mujahideen forces through the ISI (Pakistani intelligence) and eventually left Afghanistan to their disposal. The repercussions of such actions evolved into the terrorist attacks on September 11th and still affect American policy in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Moscow had a very tough decision to make on whether to send troops to Afghanistan to assist Afghan soldiers; ultimately, Soviet troops were sent. The most interesting aspect of the decision to deploy troops in Afghanistan was that the Politburo was only given half of the story, and that Brezhnev and his advisors within the KGB in fact made most of the decisions. The decision came at the backdrop of an Islamic revival within Asia, and the Soviet Union, quite rightly, was worried that it may spread to central Asia, an area primarily of citizens with an affinity to Islam. Moscow's decision was based on three primary issues: Soviet interests in Afghanistan, their relationship with Pakistan and Iran, and Soviet rivalry with the United States in the Middle East.

By 1975, the Soviet Union had garnered steady relations with Afghanistan and assisted in over 70 development projects. Even with these projects, Soviet influence was minimal, as Kabul pushed for better relationships with Iran and Pakistan, both Muslim majority countries, and nations with whom they shared previous sour relationships. This was an issue for the Soviet Union, and the primary factor behind them supporting the coup d'état by

Taraki and Amin both members of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). This coup created a government that was inclined to Socialist ideologies, and as a result was much friendlier to the Soviet Union.

This Marxist-oriented party was very brutal in its approach to politics and silenced any sort of criticism that was thrown at them. This created both a huge backlash in the form of resistant fighters, who were religiously oriented, as well as an outcry by the United States who slowly realized the implications of a Soviet-friendly nation so close to the Middle East and their economic incentives. Though there is no proof that Moscow had assisted the coup attempt on the previous government, they were quick to throw their support behind it. During the same year, KGB officials were being sent to Afghanistan to gather information on the situation and to assist the government in covert operations against the growing opposition to the PDPA. According to Oleg Kalugin, former KGB agent, the Soviet and Afghan intelligence agencies both signed a cooperation agreement and eventually pushed for more Soviet involvement in Afghanistan. This came in the form of troops being deployed slowly through the Bagram Airforce base to ensure that minimum international attention was given to it. Taraki was provided with several Soviet advisors that would assist in the formation of a socialist government that could centralize authority. However, opposition grew and, according to the KGB, there had been growing Islamic extremism capable of ousting the PDPA.

Even with such actions being taken, it is quite unfortunate that the KGB informed the Politburo that the resistance was only minimal and one that could be taken care by Soviet forces. KGB commandos were sent to decipher

Afghan public opinion on Soviet troop deployment. Information gathered was extremely disheartening, as many Afghans stated they would fight a Soviet invasion in which “...there was no way to win it without exterminating the entire nation”.

This was arguably the first mistake that was taken by the Kremlin; knowing that the general population would despise such actions, and yet proceeding with the invasion. The power of the resistant forces was underestimated, particularly regarding the fact that the United States was fully funding these groups through the ISI. KGB chief, Yuri Andropov however, asked Kalugin to draw a plan of action that should be taken in Afghanistan and a general strategy to ensure stability. Moscow wanted to replace Amin, who had dethroned Taraki and was now even willing to negotiate with the West to ensure that he remained in power. The best plan of action was to put in a puppet government, while the real power would be, of course, held by the Soviet Union. Moscow continued to push for greater troop deployment within the country, but Amin did not agree to such actions. Moscow’s reasoning behind further deployment was simple: the Afghan army was both demoralized and inefficient, and therefore they would lose out against the Mujahideen, and an ‘Islamist’ government hostile to the Soviets may come in power. Moscow did not want a conservative Muslim government in place, as they were already threatened by the Ayatollah and did not need any more instability within the region. Relations with Pakistan were no better and consequently, protecting the PDPA was the only option. The Soviet Union had always supported India in their fight for Kashmir and for this reason Pakistan allied itself with the United States. Though Pakistani relations had toned

down with the United States during the 70s, Soviet aggression had pushed them back towards being an Islamic Republic. Pakistan itself was very worried that the Soviet Union would attack their border next, in an attempt to reach a warm seaport.

It is necessary to understand Soviet psyche in such a situation, and why troop deployment was such a popular idea amongst the KGB and Defense officials. Military intelligence, to put it lightly, had miscalculated the strength of the Mujahideen. According to Soviet sources, the military believed that the campaign would last only a year to a year and a half. A timeline was not the only problem; many within the Ministry of Defence, including Andropov and Minister of Defence, Dmitriy Ustinov, believed that it was a mission that would only take two thousand troops. Even by December, the only officials to know of the impending invasion plans were the military units who were about to be sent to Afghanistan. On December 24th, however, Ustinov informed senior Defence officials of the plan to send troops. This was the same day he and Chief of General Staff, Nikolai Ogarkov, had signed on sending troops for “ the purpose of providing international assistance to the friendly Afghan people...” That is to say that the Soviet citizens were being told that the troops were sent to Afghanistan as peacekeepers and not to ‘ install peace’. The media was banned from reporting the situation on the ground and, until 1985, reported that these troops were partaking in paramilitary operations with the Afghan forces. Casualties and deaths were kept hidden for the longest time and veterans were forced to stay silent on the issue of their experiences for as long as possible.

The Soviet psyche was unprepared for such a war. Many conscripts believed that they were sent to assist a nation instead of invading it, so it became very difficult for the soldiers to grasp that they were lied to and were in fact colonizing a society. Similarly, it was difficult for citizens at home to realize that they were also lied to and that the government had actually sent these troops to war and not on a peacekeeping/ training mission. The Soviet hierarchy legitimately tried to keep the war a secret from the people for as long as possible, though this did not last.

A lack of proper training in modern guerilla tactics, officers inexperienced with war itself, coupled with, as previously mentioned, a false psyche for soldiers (initiating peace within the region as opposed to an offensive) surely created a catastrophic situation in Afghanistan. Once in Afghanistan, troops were given inadequate orders, in addition to inadequate equipment. Soldiers were not provided with proper sleeping bags, many had to sleep in temperatures of -30 degrees Celsius, while there was a lack of face shields to provide cover from the sun on days where the temperature would rise above 40 degrees Celsius. Even the hiking boots that were provided to the soldiers wore out, subsequently, soldiers were forced to buy normal running shoes and use those in a terrain where boots became necessary.

What made the situation worse was the poor logistical system and horrible field maintenance. Helicopters, when introduced, assisted in changing the tide in favour of the Soviets, yet the Mujahideen soon were able to cope with their presence. The Soviet army was not prepared for this war; guerrilla style battles are part of modern warfare and they had scarcely studied their post-war battles with Ukrainian and Baltic guerrillas, ignoring such lessons proved

detrimental. Lack of combat situations since the end of the Second World War, soldiers had since fallen “ into such lethargy” and that training was “ not corresponding to the requirements of modern battle,” that, according to higher officers partaking in the mission, most soldiers died due to poor training exercises prior to the offensive and the lack of experience in modern warfare.

Sanitation and hygiene were horrible; of the soldiers that served in Afghanistan, 52% caught infectious diseases. Of these men, for every soldier who was treated for combat wounds, more than eight died due to inadequate treatment for infectious diseases and those wounded in battle were not provided for. This, of course, affected the soldiers greatly, there were over 6412 crimes committed by Soviet soldiers, which include 714 murders. The problem of Dedovshchina, worsened in Afghanistan, the Soviet Defence Ministry translated it as “ nonregulation inter-relationships,” but reality was far from this. Many soldiers were mistreated by senior enlisted men, crippled or killed at times, and many committed suicide rather than face further beatings and male rape. This caused a huge problem within the forces as many even deserted to the Mujahideens or even killed their tormenters. The official response to such activity was appalling, military commanders tried to hide or deny the problem, and only after the reforms of Glasnost did the armed forces actually make a half-hearted attempt to solve the problem. Morale was very low and such activities caused distrust amongst soldiers and resentment towards the military. It is quite natural that soldiers would not wish to fight in such circumstances. These issues only assisted the Mujahideen forces in their quest to rid the country of the

Soviets. If these were only the recorded brutal crimes committed against fellow soldiers, one can only imagine what the situation with Afghani civilians was like.

As earlier stated, the Soviet psyche could not understand the situation that was on hand. The government had both lied to the greater population and systematically attempted to conceal the truth by coercing returning soldiers into remaining silent on the issue and continuously harassing the mass media. Soviet propaganda had instated within the mindset of the public that the Soviet Union was a very powerful nation willing to spread socialism and, in doing so, alleviating problems within the world. With such actions being taken, returning soldiers were not only looked down upon for the heinous actions that were taken place, but also many were not even recognized for their courageous actions in Afghanistan. This is because civilians were not aware that a war was taking place, and once they did find the truth, were embarrassed by the actions of the army. Many soldiers that died in Afghanistan were not reported about and until families spoke out against the government little action was ever taken. Hiding casualties within itself became a huge sin for the Soviet Union.

Such actions of course also caused resentment within the military, and also towards it. Soviet military advisors did not like that the public believed that troops were engaged in “ everything but a war”. The vast majority of the population was not aware of what was taking place in Afghanistan. Medals were not presented to soldiers in public, creating more problems, as most of the population did not understand why these soldiers should even be honoured at all. Individual acts of heroism though, were given ample

attention (albeit with false information). The media publicized these acts, as soldiers assisting Afghans or repelling Mujahideen forces on the southern border. Yet, there remained no reports of an offensive taking place by the army. This cloud of secrecy that blanketed the war created an atmosphere of paranoia and great frustration towards the government and the military. Consequently, this created instability from a public relations point of view. These kinds of actions were exactly what adversaries of the Soviet Union were only waiting for and in fact hurt the nation more than they assisted it in any way.

Brezhnev's legacy in Europe of rigid and shortsighted diplomacy had produced a political and economic conundrum. The economy was already stagnating under the control of Brezhnev, and now the Soviet Union made the fatal error of invading Afghanistan, causing ripple effects across the world. By 1983, the tide had changed and the USSR had realized that the Afghan problem (that they had created) could not be resolved by military force. After Brezhnev's death, Andropov was voted into power and swiftly began to make changes to the Afghan campaign. Speaking to the Perez de Cueller, Secretary-General of the United Nations, Andropov, drew up five main reasons as to why the Afghan campaign was detrimental to the Soviet Union. Therefore, it is necessary to note the reaction the impending invasion was given, as well as the actions that nations such as the United States partook in to ensure that Afghanistan became the Soviet Union's Vietnam.

The sudden rise in Islamic sentiment in the Middle East and the rise of the Ayatollah in Iran was not only a wake up call for the United States, but was one for the Soviet Union as well. By the time Taraki had taken over the

government in Afghanistan, the United States had realized that supporting the Mujahideen forces was absolutely necessary, as this would increase the pressure on the Soviet Union to invade and take matters into their own hands. In fact, Carter's Administration was planning for such an event in the first place. Brzezinski (National Security Advisor) realized that the Mujahideen would force the Soviet Union to react and 'the secret operation' would draw the Soviets into the 'Afghan trap' that the United States was preparing. The occupation of Afghanistan is very significant in terms of American participation, as it was an issue that united the country domestically. This was a rare instance in which the Soviet Union could be defeated through propaganda and Brzezinski saw this as an opportunity (like many American lawmakers and Congressmen), "to finally sow shit in their backyard (Soviet Union)" The United States primary goal was to ensure that the flow of resources from the Persian Gulf would not be affected by any means, and that the Afghan invasion threatened the status quo of the region. In order to ensure the economic incentives of the United States remains safe, Carter's Administration began a covert operation against the Soviet Union army and began training many Mujahideen's through the CIA and the ISI. The Mujahideens were initially discouraged by the Soviet response to the insurgency, but with the assistance of the United States, the Afghani's created another front on which the Soviet's would be forced keep focused on. Carter was not reelected but the covert war continued, and funding to the military was drastically increased per year under Reagan's term. Naturally, the United States did not want the Soviet Union coming out of the war with many positives.

Though United States sanctions on the Soviet Union were unable to prevent the Soviet Union from continuing its military operation, it did however bring some economic loss. By curbing the Soviet fishing privileges in US water, the economy suffered a loss of 55 million rubles to 60 million rubbles, a significant amount. In addition, blocking grain sales that were already paid for by the Soviet Union brought losses to the nation as well as created shortages in food supply. Fortunately for the Soviet Union however, while the United States did impose sanctions, its allies could not follow suit. The Congress Research Service assessed the impact of the sanctions and discovered that there were minimal benefits from them. Alone, the United States could not impact the Soviet economy, as its allies politically backed the decision were unwilling to support the “ principle of economic punishment adopted by the Carter Administration,” i. e. also impose sanctions. The allies, however, followed the United States in the condemnation of the invasion and in boycotting the Olympic games in Moscow.

The boycott of the 1980s Olympics in Moscow was also a success for the United States and a propaganda blow for the Soviet Union. Over 64 nations boycotted the event including many Middle Eastern and Muslim majority nations for whose influence both superpowers wrestled and the importance the Soviet Union did not realize until it was too late. In response, the Soviet Union, as well as 17 other nations, boycotted the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles. During the 1980s presidential elections, both parties in America notched the rhetoric up as the elections began to primarily revolve around international issues and propelling the United States to a dominant position. The Soviet Union took another blow to their public relations around the

world, when Regan began to refer to the state as the ' Evil Empire,' a term that became fixed in American rhetoric over the years. According to Hartman, " the mujihadin became the centerpiece of the Reagan Doctrine-to increase the cost of Soviet support of Third World socialist governments." Furthermore, it was necessary to ensure that if the economy of the Soviet Union did not suffer for the decisions that were taken in Afghanistan, at least hurting its military and ruining its reputation was a feasible alternative.

Prior to the invasion, the United States wished to distance itself from the Pakistani government due to its poor human rights record and its insistence on obtaining nuclear arsenals, as well as decreased funding to the country. However, Soviet and Afghan relations worried the United States and they eventually began to set up training camps within Pakistan with the assistance of both China and other Muslim majority nations. Brzezinski, in May 1978, met the Chinese Premier, Deng Xiaoping, and reached an agreement on mutual security. The serious implementation of funds and intelligence assistance to the Mujahideen did not begin until Reagan was in power, as the Central Intelligence Agency used Pakistani Intelligence (ISI) as the " middle-man."

The Soviet Union did not expect other nations to assist the covert operation, and the CIA also denied any involvement with the operation by stating that it only supplied weapons and equipment that was already being used by the Soviets and its allies. By denying any involvement within Afghanistan, the CIA was able to gain support from many non-aligned countries that only saw Soviet aggression. Nations such as China and Egypt were also able to supply Soviet weapons to the Mujhideen. Also, Israel was assisting the cause by

supplying weapons that were confiscated from the PLO. Hence, the effort to stop the Soviet Union was disputed by many nations, and condemned by almost all. It seemed that the only assistance to the Soviet Union was in the form of mere words.

Through the assistance of Pakistan, the Mujahideens were also given training in guerilla tactics, a huge issue for the Soviet army who was not anticipating this type of warfare whatsoever. These training grounds were built in Pakistan and were a safe distance from the Soviet Union, however they were frequently under air strikes. The Mujahideen, however, gained an upper hand as they were given satellite intelligence and C-4 explosives to use in both urban and rural areas, whereas Stinger missiles (anti-aircraft) were highly effective and consequently altered the war in their favour. As previously mentioned, the Soviets were in possession of poor logistical systems and inadequate weapons at first, the Mujahideens were taking the war to them and succeeding quite astonishingly.

The Soviet Union was eventually able to withdraw their troops from Afghanistan, but the damage had been done. The economy was faltering, the military was demoralized and the government and socialist system lost its credibility in both the local and international public eye. The Soviet Union had incomprehensibly lost this war and lost its influence not only in Afghanistan, but lost a huge propaganda war; they were seen as the invaders and no longer in cooperation with detente. Only a few years later did the Soviet Union itself come to an end, an empire that was created through bloodshed fell without any shed.

There are many lessons that historians can take from the Soviet invasion as the present occupation by the United States may come to a similar, unfortunate conclusion. The United States is much better equipped and holds superior logistics than the Soviet soldiers did; yet the similarities between the two wars are clear. The United States is in a war with an ideology instead of an actual army and fighting the same militia that it armed and used against the Soviets. It is ironic that the United States and its allies now hunt Bin Laden, while 20 years ago this individual was funded by the CIA (knowing full well his anti-American sentiments). The United States also believed that the war in Afghanistan would not take long, similar to their policy once the invasion of Iraq commenced. The United States is running a similar path as the Soviet Union, exhausting its resources on the defence budget will have serious repercussions on their economy. The most glaring similarity and one that is unfortunately overlooked, is the question of legality of the invasion of Afghanistan. Both nations waged an illegal war against Afghanistan and similar to the Soviet invasion, this war has left millions of Afghanis displaced or killed. Because the unfortunate events on September 11th took place and the response was eminent, there was almost no time for scholars or officials to properly scrutinize the legal basis of the war. The United States, like the Soviet Union waged war, albeit with some backing, but lacked approval by the United Nations and international law.

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Endnotes