

The Bear Trap

The Soviet Adventure in Afghanistan

1979-1989

By

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*My spirit will remain in Afghanistan, though my soul will go to God.
My last words to you, my son and successor, are: Never trust the Russians.*

-Abdur Rahman Khan
Amir of Afghanistan 1880-1901

Introduction

On February 15, 1989, in a staged ceremony, general Boris Gromov followed his Soviet Fortieth Army across the Amu Darya River from Afghanistan into Soviet Uzbekistan. The war that had lasted nine long, brutal years was finally over. The country he left behind was shattered. The war and occupation had left Afghanistan with hundreds of thousands dead, millions displaced, a government in turmoil, no substantial infrastructure, a divided populace, and, on top of it all, a seemingly endless supply of weapons. The Soviet Union, while not mirroring the situation in Afghanistan, was in its own way teetering on the brink of collapse. In just nine months from Gromov's exit, the Berlin Wall would fall and in just under three years the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics would be officially dissolved.¹

In the 1970s and 1980s, the Afghans lived in a dangerous neighborhood. There was the behemoth of the Soviet Union sitting just to the north, occupying all the territory straight north from the border of Afghanistan to the Arctic Circle. To the northeast lay China, in the process of recovering from twenty-five traumatic years of Maoist communism. To the east lay Pakistan, and its fundamentalist Islamic dictator Mohammed Zia ul-Haq. To the south and west lay Iran, which at the time of the Soviet invasion, was convulsing from the overthrow of the Shah and the Islamic revolution of 1979. The

¹ Partially adapted from: Frederick Forsyth, *The Afghan*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 111.

Afghans were surrounded by tyranny and turmoil and in the years to come it was about to get much closer to home.

Although official political borders divided the two countries, Soviet influence was palpable in Afghanistan in the 1970s. During that decade, several successive pro-Marxist governments tried their hand at ruling the country. The Soviet leadership in Moscow, sensing an opportunity to create an ideal puppet state between themselves and the growing Islamism of those nations along their southern borders, were eager to assist the government in Kabul. This Soviet influence gradually increased through the 1970s and culminated with the invasion of the country by Soviet combat troops in the last days of the decade. The years after the invasion marred the political boundaries between the two countries. When Gromov made his ceremonious exit from the country in 1989, it signaled the end of this period of close, intense relations between the Soviet Union and Afghanistan.

For the previous nine years, however, these two countries had been intimately associated. In the period between December 1979 and February 1989, over 100,000 Soviet troops occupied Afghanistan in what turned out to be a costly and controversial military adventure. Soviet political advisors, with varying levels of success, attempted to maintain a Marxist, pro-Soviet regime in Kabul, the Afghan capital. The KGB, the feared Soviet intelligence service and secret police helped create and run an equivalent agency for the Afghan government. During the 1970s and 1980s the Soviet Union imported their military, propaganda, and reign of terror to the previously independent Muslim nation of Afghanistan.

What the Soviets received when they got to Afghanistan was a debilitating and often baffling insurgency, widespread unrest and resentment within the country and across the globe, and hopelessly incompetent allies on the ground. Despite these cruel welcoming gifts, the Soviets still managed to fight like a wounded and angry bear. They struck out wildly, committing humanitarian atrocities, sowing the hillsides of the country with millions of landmines, and terrorizing the populace. They did so while taking heavy military casualties themselves, however, and suffering a drop in morale both among the military and the general Soviet public that brings to mind the American adventure in Vietnam. The Soviets had gotten themselves into a morass populated by generous amounts of militant Islam, hatred, and endless frustration that they would take years to extricate themselves from.

Recent events in Afghanistan have left an indelible stamp on the current and future geopolitical decisions of the world's major powers. The American-led coalition's occupation of the country beginning in 2001 has thrust the world's spotlight back onto this mountainous land of historically divided and fiercely independent peoples. After the Soviets had withdrawn, Afghanistan launched itself headlong into a vicious civil war. Competing factions left over from the Soviet war battled amongst themselves and with a central government respected by few in the country. Within this chaos, a new group arose, born out of the madrassahs of the refugee camps in Pakistan and marked with the scars of the Soviet war. They were known as the students, or the Taliban. Though in the beginning they offered a respite from the terror and lawlessness of the civil war, the Taliban soon imposed fanatic Islamic orthodoxy on the people of Afghanistan. This government of fanatical Islam created a sanctuary within which Muslim extremist

organizations were able to safely recruit members into their ranks, train these members, and plan spectacularly violent attacks against the world's most powerful nations.

More than twenty years before the first American Special Forces soldiers set foot on Afghan soil in late 2001, another world superpower found itself in a lethal struggle with Islamic-inspired militants on that same land. The Soviets endured a lengthy and tumultuous stay in the mountains of Afghanistan. The Soviet experience was characterized by a fatally fractured and unpopular central government, a desperately incompetent ally in the Afghan Army, bitter resentment from the international community and from the Afghan population, and perhaps most important, a basic misunderstanding of past mistakes. For United States and coalition operations forces in the Afghanistan today, a through study and understanding of the very recent Soviet occupation of that country is crucially necessary to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past, which led to a shameful withdrawal and long lasting scars that remain years later.

The Soviets failed in Afghanistan because they entered the country ignorant to the realities on the ground. They tried to implement godless Communism on a country of largely devout Muslims who were located between a country to the west that had just experienced an Islamic revolution and a country to the east ruled by a fundamentalist Islamic dictator. After they had invaded, the Soviets found themselves unprepared to deal with the sort of insurgency that rose against them. At the same time they were hampered by the Afghan Army whom they soon found they could not rely on and actually often did more harm than good. These factors, accompanied by the widespread unpopularity of the war just about everywhere in the world and the resentment of the Afghan people towards

their Soviet occupiers were what led to the wholesale Soviet withdrawal from the country in 1989.

The Soviets were one of several world empires in history to run into trouble in Afghanistan. Had they studied these past incursions, the lessons they could have learned might not have completely changed the outcome of their story, but they would have better prepared for what they had coming.

I

Borderline of Empires

*A scrimmage in a border station
A canter down some dark defile
Two thousand pounds of education
Drops to a ten rupee jezail*

-Rudyard Kipling *Arithmetic on the Frontier*

The Afghan people have a long and intimate history with world empires. Whether it was the Macedonians under Alexander sweeping through the plains and mountains of Afghanistan on their way to India, or the British colonial forces pushing northward from India, Afghans have become well acquainted with visits from world superpowers. However, in most of these adventures, Afghanistan has not been the prize. It just seems to keep getting in the way.

The British era in India began in 1612 and by the end of the 18th century, their influence had spread into the northern reaches of the Indian subcontinent and they were knocking at the door of Central Asia. Poised at that door was the land of the Afghans, better known today as Afghanistan.

Another great empire of the early 19th century, Russia, was also looking to expand its lands into the inner reaches of Asia. Under the czar, the Russians were pushing down from the north and would meet the British in Afghanistan. With the ascension of Dost Mohammed to the Afghan throne in Kabul in 1826, what is known as the Great Game

began.² The Great Game was the competition between the Russians and the British for control, but more often simply influence, over the lands of Central and Southwest Asia. The essence of the Great Game, however, was the manipulation of the numerous small states that were located between the two empires.³ Afghanistan was one of these nations.

On several occasions, the British tried to invade the land of the Afghans and fought two wars, known as the Anglo-Afghan Wars, during the mid-19th century.⁴ The British writer and poet Rudyard Kipling, best known for his work on the British interests in India and on the adjacent frontiers, wrote about these episodes. He quite vividly describes the plight of the British soldiers, the products of expensive education in England, against the Afghan warriors and their jezail, their distinctive muskets, in his poem *Arithmetic on the Frontier*.

The first Anglo-Afghan war was an “unmitigated disaster” and culminated with perhaps the most well known incident of the war, the annihilation of the British soldiers on the march from Kabul to Jalalabad. On January 6, 1842 the British garrison of nearly 15,000 left Kabul under a treaty signed by a number of Afghan tribal leaders. They marched in the deep snows of winter through precarious mountain passes. Warriors from another Afghan tribe, the Ghilzai, who had not been a party to the treaty, attacked the vulnerable British. The column was wiped out nearly to the last man, although several survived as prisoners and hostages.⁵ The destruction of the column instigated violent retaliations in both directions, British unto Afghans and Afghans unto British. The

² Richard F. Nyrop and Donald M. Seekins, ed., *Afghanistan: A Country Study* (Washington D.C.: American University Foreign Area Studies, 1986), 22-23.

³ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴ Ralph Magnus and Eden Naby, *Afghanistan: Mullah, Marx, and Mujahid* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), 60.

⁵ Nyrop, *Afghanistan: A Country Study*, 28-29.

incident, however, characterized British incursions into Afghanistan during the 19th century.

By 1869 the Russian tide had reached the Amu Darya River, the northern border of current day Afghanistan. Not to be outdone, the British increased their stake in the lands bordering Afghanistan as well. By 1895 the British had taken control of most of what is modern-day Pakistan, the territories known as the Sind, Kashmir, Punjab, Baluchistan, and the North-West Frontier.⁶

By the turn of the 20th century, however, the competition had subsided as events elsewhere in the world took away the attention of the Russians and the British. In 1907 the Anglo-Russian Convention was signed which ended competition for territory between the two powers. The treaty created respective spheres of influence in Central Asia and the Middle East as well as establishing Afghanistan as a neutral state.⁷

Two years after the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 shook Russia to its core, Afghanistan gained full independence.⁸ This did not signal an end to outside manipulation of Afghanistan, however. The Soviet Union that resulted from the 1917 revolution proved to be just as meddlesome in the internal affairs of the Kabul government.

In the early days of the Soviet Union, a Muslim group in Central Asia known to the Russians as the *basmachis*, or “bandits,” resisted the Bolsheviks throughout the 1920s. They were finally put down in 1929 and Russian leader Joseph Stalin’s solution to quell future rebellions was to divide Soviet Central Asia into five socialist republics by

⁶ Ibid., 30.

⁷ Ibid., 39-40.

⁸ Ibid., 44.

“demarcating borders not along geographic or ethnic lines but in ways that seemed likeliest to suppress dissent.”⁹ The results of this action are the largely Muslim countries of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan.

The Soviets, dealing with this large number of Muslims within their borders, were eager to placate them and saw interaction with Afghanistan as an expedient way to do so. In addition to quieting Muslims within their own borders, close connections with the government in Kabul also allowed the Soviets to keep pressure on the British, who at the time were still masters of India. The Soviets viewed Afghanistan as a useful tool in these two regards and cemented the relationship by signing a Treaty of Friendship in 1921.¹⁰ The treaty allowed for the Soviets to send different forms of aid to the Afghans, bringing them ever closer into the Soviet’s corner.

By 1950, trade between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union provided a strong link between the two countries. An agreement had been signed by which Soviet oil, textiles, and manufactured goods would be traded for Afghan wool and cotton.¹¹ These links allowed for small numbers of Soviet officials to be sent to Afghanistan. They were sent in the wake of these trade agreements and further strengthened the ties between the two countries.

While the Afghans and Soviets were becoming ever closer, the British were leaving India. In 1947 India gained full independence and the territory was divided along religious lines to make Hindu India to the south and Muslim Pakistan to the west. In the wake of this, early problems for Afghanistan centered largely on the issue of

⁹ Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 6, 35.

¹⁰ Nyrop, *Afghanistan: A Country Study*, 43-44.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 56.

“Pashtunistan,” or land of the Pashtun. The northwest border of Pakistan and Afghanistan is located in the middle of the traditional lands of the Pashtun tribes, dividing them between the two countries. Border disputes with Pakistan, which was becoming closer to the United States, led the Afghans to further explore their options with the Soviets. The Afghans were pushed further in the direction of the Soviets when, in response to cross-border raids by Afghan tribesman, Pakistan cut off petroleum shipments to Afghanistan for several months in 1950.¹² These problems in the Pashtun territories of Pakistan and Afghanistan have continued right down until the present day. Even in more recent times in 2008 the Pakistani government is largely unable to exert any control over the tribally governed Pashtun territories in their northwest provinces. These areas are known as the federally administered tribal areas and the government in Islamabad simply does not hold sway in these areas. Ethnic problems such as these are nothing new for Afghanistan, which has an identity that is colored by its diverse ethnic makeup.

Dominant among Afghanistan’s ethnic groups are the Pashtun. As of the Soviet invasion in 1979, people from this group made up about one-half of the country’s population of about 16 million people.¹³ The Pashtun, however, were only one of about 20 ethnic groups in the country. Other major groups were the Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazara. These three groups, along with the Pashtun, made up about 80 percent of the country’s population.¹⁴

¹² Ibid., 55-56.

¹³ Central Intelligence Agency, National Foreign Assessment Center, *Afghanistan: Ethnic Diversity and Dissidence* (March 1, 1980)

¹⁴ Ibid.

In 1980, Pashtun governed most of the provinces in the country and most ethnic groups saw the Pashtun as devoted to catering to their own people. From the perspective of the other ethnic groups, a state of “internal colonialism” was present.¹⁵ The Pashtun dominance in regional government also extended to the national government in Kabul.

Pashtun, as the largest ethnic group, are found across the country, but they are most densely located in the east and south of the country. The Hazara are traditionally in the central part of the country and the Uzbeks and Tajiks are most commonly found in the north.¹⁶ These are very loose boundaries, however, and are not at all clearly defined.

Besides these major ethnic groups, another group with a large presence in the country are the *kuchi* nomads. Intensely suspicious of government interference with their way of life, the *kuchis* have managed to stay largely outside of government control and regulation.¹⁷ Exact population numbers of the nomads have thus been difficult to obtain, but estimates range up to several million. Because the *kuchis* move largely unfettered through the country, they serve a key role in the structure of commerce, bringing goods from elsewhere in Afghanistan and neighboring countries to trade with local populations.

Among these many groups, however, there are several common threads. Among Afghans, family, territory, and property are the focal points of life.¹⁸ Familial and gender roles are defined by a patrilineal system and by “bellicose males and secluded women.”¹⁹ These characteristics, fused with Islam, provide an identity for most Afghans.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ National Geographic, “Afghanistan: Land in Crisis,” map.

¹⁷ Central Intelligence Agency, National Foreign Assessment Center, *Afghanistan: Ethnic Diversity and Dissidence*.

¹⁸ Nyrop, *Afghanistan: A Country Study*, 101.

¹⁹ Ibid., 77.

Islam is a vital strand of unity in Afghanistan. Afghanistan is "... a conglomeration of ethnic groups tied loosely within state boundaries by means of traditional Islam."²⁰ Perhaps not surprisingly given its proximity to Iran, Afghanistan possesses a number of Shia Muslims. As is the case in most of the Muslim world, however, Sunnis are the majority.

A stark picture of the depth of Afghan Islam can be found in the education system. In the mid-20th century, there were two competing forces in the realm of education. The first were the state sponsored schools that were mostly found in and around large cities; the second were the traditional religious schools that were commonly found in countryside villages. Most government schools sprung up after 1950 while the local Qu'ranic schools, schools based on Islam and usually taught by a preacher or imam, had a much older tradition. Qu'ranic schools taught children the rudiments of literacy and religion.²¹ This was their basic education, and, in many cases, their only education.

Those students in the Qu'ranic schools who either were able to or wished to pursue their studies further would, after their education at the local school, move on to a madrassah. This is where they would tackle more advanced religious studies. Chief among their curriculum was often rote learning of the Qu'ran. Memorization of its verses is considered a mark of honor in an Islamic society. After graduating from the madrassah they were able to choose if they wanted to start their own madrassah or pursue their education at a higher level. Students in these madrassahs learned subjects common to religious study elsewhere in the Muslim world. They learned classical Arabic, theology,

²⁰ Magnus, *Afghanistan: Mullah, Marx and Mujahid*, 97.

²¹ Oliver Roy, "The *Mujahedin* and the Preservation of Afghan Culture," in *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union: Collision and Transformation*, ed. Milan Hauner and Robert L. Canfield (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989), 42.

interpretation of the Qu'ran, the traditions of the Prophet, and Islamic law.²² This flood of religious schooling created a society deeply steeped in and dependant upon religion. It is a society that is well versed in the tenets of its guiding force, religion, but severely handicapped in the subjects of modernity.

The government schools, on the other hand, taught subjects more suited for the 20th century world. They taught subjects such as history and geography, physics and mathematics, as well as religion. The modern educational system in Afghanistan had roots going back as far as 1903, when Amir Habibullah established Habibiya College. It was a school largely modeled on British schools in India. The first girl's schools came to Kabul in the 1920s.²³ The reach of the modern education system extended into the villages, although the more rural villages typically just had elementary schools while the high schools were often confined to the cities. At the top of the system were the universities, chief among which was Kabul University.

Kabul University during the 1960s played host to a number of student movements. The generation of Afghans who came out of the universities during this period displayed a degree of modernity not before seen in Afghanistan. Some formed extremist parties, rooted in ideologies from Islam to Communism. A group pivotal to the future of the country was founded during this period. In 1965, the openly Marxist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA, or *Khalq*, or "Masses," Party) was founded.²⁴ This party would be crucial to Afghan politics during the tumultuous years of the 1970s.

²² Roy, "The *Mujahedin* and the Preservation of Afghan Culture," 42-43.

²³ Magnus, *Afghanistan: Mullah, Marx, and Mujahid*, 99.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 59.

Throughout their history, Afghans have become well acquainted with powers seeking empire in Central Asia. In most encounters, the Afghans have been able to maintain their integrity as a people. They maintain as a people despite encompassing numerous ethnic groups and being rooted in a deeply tribalistic social order. Through common threads such as Islam and common personal values they have found unity in times of need.

Of those powers seeking empire in Central Asia, the Afghans relationship with the Russians has been the most intimate and long lasting. The Russians have maintained ties with Afghanistan despite the departure from the region of their major rival, the British. Whether as the Russians or as the Soviets, Afghans have long felt the weight of their neighbor to the north. In the years to come, that weight was about to come crashing down upon them.

II

Shades of Red

*The power of the family has been put to an end...
Now, for the first time, power has come to the hands of the people.*

-Afghan government radio after the communist coup of 1978

The decade of the 1970s saw the beginning of a new order in Afghanistan. It was in this decade that Afghanistan began their experiment with communism. Like most other places it had been tried in the world, it was a disaster. Afghanistan ended up especially scarred, however. Incompetent government and failed policies led to years of civil war and violence. The downward spiral began in 1973 with the first of the decade's several coups.

In that year, King Mohammad Zahir Shah, who had ruled the country for the previous forty years, was overthrown and a republican government replaced the monarchy. It was the king's cousin, Mohammad Daoud who seized power and became the president of Afghanistan.²⁵ Although Daoud was not a Marxist, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan supported the coup. Their support grew more out of a desire for change than any real love of Daoud as a leader or statesman, however. This desire for change allowed the PDPA to unite on several occasions in the face of a debilitating internal division that had surfaced years earlier.

²⁵ Magnus, *Afghanistan: Mullah, Marx and Mujahid*, 98.

In 1967, two years after the party was founded, the PDPA split into two groups: the Khalq faction and the Parcham faction. The PDPA's original founder Nur Mohammad Taraki led the Khalqis. Babrak Karmal led the splinter group, the Parchamis. Both groups shared the same Marxist-Leninist ideology, but philosophical and personal differences divided them. While the Khalqis were less influenced by outside forces, the Parchamis were known to have been close to Moscow. They were also more flexible and willing to use proxies to attain their goals, thus they were instrumental in working with Daoud in the 1973 coup to overthrow the monarchy.²⁶

The Parchamis, while receiving greater support from Moscow, were not as large or as well organized as the Khalqis. The base of the Parchamis were urban intellectuals, professionals, and students, sometimes leading the group to the called "Afghanistan's 'Communist Aristocracy.'" The Khalqis on the other hand, recruited largely in the civil government, the military, and the countryside. It was also said to have a more Pashtun dominated base, whereas the Parchamis included a wider array of ethnicities.²⁷

Despite their differences, the two groups reunited in 1977 and in the following year would overthrow Daoud. Once again, they had tired of the non-communist government. The time for revolution had come; this is the real beginning of the Marxist experiment in Afghanistan. In April of 1978 communist leaders in Kabul staged a disruptive protest and were arrested by Daoud's government. This event set off the communist powder keg that by this time was embedded in Afghan society. The coup that followed was violent, with fierce fighting in the capital. It was led by rebellious

²⁶ United States Department of State Bureau of Public Affairs, *Soviet Dilemmas in Afghanistan*, Special Report No. 72, June 1980.

²⁷ Ibid.

communist factions within the military who were able to bring the firepower of the Afghan Army to bear on the apparatus of the Daoud government. There were tanks in the streets and MIG fighters strafed government buildings.²⁸ There was fighting throughout the capital as military units loyal to Daoud tried to stave off the rebels. The Presidential Palace was the main target of the rebels and received the brunt of the attacks.

Immediately after the coup, reports were that Daoud's family members were seeking shelter in the French Embassy, which was located next to the Presidential Palace.²⁹ The end came when communists from the Afghan Army shot Daoud in the reception room of his palace.³⁰ Soon after, government radio broadcast the beginning of a new period: "Daoud is gone forever...the last remnants of imperialist tyranny and despotism have been put to an end."³¹

The victorious communists installed their own government and Nur Mohammed Taraki, the founder of the PDPA and leader of the Khalq faction, took control of the country. In an article in the *New York Times* from May of 1978, a U.S. State Department spokesman identified Taraki as the "Secretary General of the Communist Party" as well as the prime minister and the head of the Revolutionary Council.³² The semblance of unity that had been shown by the Khalqis and the Parchamis during the coup was short-lived. The Khalqis, due to their better organization and larger numbers, were quickly able to gain control over much of the government. The leaders of the Parchamis such as

²⁸ William Borders, "Coup Is Reported in Afghanistan After Heavy Fighting in Capital," *New York Times*, April 28, 1978.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 39.

³¹ As quoted in: Borders, "Coup Is Reported in Afghanistan After Heavy Fighting in Capital," *New York Times*.

³² Graham Hovey, "Afghan Coup Was Surprise to U.S.," *New York Times*, May 2, 1978.

Babrak Karmal were relegated to lesser roles within the government and were soon dismissed from the government altogether.³³ In the time between the overthrow of Daoud in early 1978 and the Soviet invasion in late 1979, the Khalqis pursued a campaign of persecution against their rival faction. Numerous members of the Parcham party were imprisoned and some were tortured and killed.³⁴

With the ascension of a communist government in Kabul, the Soviet Union moved even closer into Afghan affairs. Moscow sent even more political advisers into the country. Because of their common ethnic background with many Afghans, the Soviets most often sent advisers who spoke Persian, Uzbek, or Turkmen and were from the Central Asian republics within the Soviet Union. A new Soviet-Afghan treaty was signed in Moscow in December of 1978. Perhaps emboldened by what they saw as their solid ties to Moscow, the new government in Kabul even attempted a land-reform program. The move was most likely undertaken to solidify the rule of the new government “because control of land is the key strength of any rurally based elite, attacking the traditional system of land ownership appeared to be the key to breaking the power of the opposition movement before it could get started.”³⁵ It turned out to do more harm than good, however. The reform was “hastily conceived...and partially implemented” and was an “economic disaster that brought chaos at all levels of society.”³⁶ Through failed policies such as this one, it soon became clear that the survival of the new communist regime in Kabul depended on the continued support of the Soviet Union.

³³ U.S. Department of State, *Soviet Dilemmas in Afghanistan*.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Magnus, *Afghanistan: Mullah, Marx and Mujahid*, 126.

³⁶ Ibid.

To make the situation worse, internal divisions again surfaced in the now ruling PDPA. The Khalq faction began to fracture between supporters of Taraki, and supporters of his top deputy, Hafizullah Amin, a former failed graduate student at Columbia University in New York.³⁷ Amin was the foreign minister within the Taraki government and in the spring of 1979, Amin caught wind of a plan, originating from Taraki, to remove him from power. Before Taraki could act, Amin struck, had Taraki killed and then assumed power.³⁸ A decisive factor that led to Amin's victory in this game of political chess was that Amin had control over the military and security services. These two forces would be crucial in securing the country against internal opponents to the Kabul government. In an effort to solidify the military and the government's hold over the country, Amin allowed a growing Soviet presence within the military. He allowed even more advisors to permeate all ranks of the army and also allowed limited numbers of Soviet combat units into the country to help secure Kabul and free the Afghan Army to carry out offensive actions against insurgents in the provinces.³⁹ Amin's ascent to leadership was marred by a devolving security situation within the country that was perhaps best epitomized by the horror of the uprising in Herat.

In March of 1979 a captain in the Afghan Army named Ismail Khan led his garrison in the western city of Herat in revolt against the communists. Those loyal to him brutally killed more than a dozen Soviet advisors and their families. These rebels then displayed the Soviet bodies on pikes along the streets of Herat. In response to the brutal

³⁷ Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 46.

³⁸ Magnus, *Afghanistan: Mullah, Marx and Mujahid*, 128.

³⁹ Ibid.

killings, the communist government in Kabul launched air raids that destroyed much of the city and killed nearly twenty thousand civilians.⁴⁰

At this point, it was becoming clear to the Soviets that the situation in Afghanistan was not going favorably. To the Soviets, the Afghans were “confusing and frustrating clients.” Soviet leaders trying to work with the Afghans found they were “dense, self-absorbed, and unreliable.”⁴¹ In the end, a report prepared for Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev concluded that the Afghan communists were suffering because of, among other things, the weakness of the Communist Party in Afghanistan and the selfishness of the communist Afghan leaders.⁴² The inability of the Afghan communist leadership to avert the chaos was leading the Soviets closer and closer to direct intervention.

During the Brezhnev years, intervention was part of the Soviet operating philosophy. Coined the “Brezhnev Doctrine,” Moscow believed it had the right to intervene in a Soviet client state if the communist government there was threatened.⁴³ Within the Soviet sphere it was believed that backsliders must be kept to a minimum. If any state became communist, especially with the explicit assistance of Moscow, then Soviet prestige was directly intertwined with the fate of that government.⁴⁴ The “Brezhnev Doctrine” thus gave the Soviet Union a means by which to protect that prestige.

⁴⁰ Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 40.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 45.

⁴³ Thomas T. Hammond, *Red Flag Over Afghanistan: The Communist Coup, the Soviet Invasion, and the Consequences* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1984), 132.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 135.

Aside from maintaining its communist satellites, Moscow was obsessed with preserving the integrity of its borders. The best way of doing this was to have regimes favorable to Moscow in those countries that bordered the Soviet Union. If that failed, the back up plan that had succeeded in the past was simply stationing Soviet troops in those countries. This is what had been done at various times in Outer Mongolia, Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary.⁴⁵ In the late 1970s it seemed that Afghanistan was next in line.

By 1980, the Soviets were no strangers to counterinsurgency operations and also had a vested interest in the situation in Afghanistan. In several previous cases the Soviets had aided allies against internal insurgencies: Iraq in 1974, Angola in 1976, and Ethiopia in 1978. They had done it before and due to the increasing chaos inside Afghanistan by late 1979 it was becoming clearer they might have to do it again. Aside from maintaining a fellow communist government in a neighboring country, the Soviets also wanted to prevent an arc of unsettlingly militant Islamic states comprised of Iran, Pakistan, and possibly Afghanistan, along its southern border.⁴⁶ In Afghanistan the Soviets saw their opportunity to break that arc.

If the rebels that were cropping up all over the country were able to topple the Kabul government, it's very likely they would establish close ties with neighboring Pakistan. This was highly unsettling for the Soviets because not only would another Muslim government be added along their southern border, but also one closely allied with Pakistan, which was becoming closer and closer with Washington. From the Pakistani

⁴⁵ Ibid., 132.

⁴⁶ Robert O. Freedman, *Moscow and the Middle East: Soviet Policy Since the Invasion of Afghanistan*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 72.

perspective, they were perhaps afraid of being caught within a vise between a possibly Soviet communist Afghanistan and India, which was not only their mortal enemy but was also friendly with the Soviet Union.⁴⁷ It was in Pakistan's interest therefore to create strong ties to the world's other superpower, the United States. The Soviets feared this alliance expanding into Afghanistan, with whom they share a long border.

Afghanistan also holds significance because of its geographic location. Perhaps a lesser reason for Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, but a reason nonetheless, is the expansion of Soviet reach over vital lands in the Middle East and South Asia. A major Soviet presence in Afghanistan would allow the Soviets to project direct influence that would reach the Indian Ocean and the Strait of Hormuz. Given the quantity of oil that passes through it, the Strait of Hormuz is one of, if not the, most valuable maritime chokepoint in the world, at least from a natural resource perspective. Soviet policy has been described as a general desire to accumulate resources.⁴⁸ A Soviet defector from Moscow's Institute of United States Studies puts it best: "The Soviet government behaves like an ordinary Soviet consumer. He grabs anything which happens to be on the counter, even if he doesn't need it, knowing that tomorrow it may no longer be available."⁴⁹ When trying to explain the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, strategic considerations such as these must be considered along with the more prominent political and ideological reasons.

⁴⁷ George Friedman, *Al Qaeda, Afghanistan, and the Good War*, Stratfor Forecasting Inc., Geopolitical Weekly, February 26, 2008.

⁴⁸ John F. Shroder Jr., "Afghan Resources and Soviet Policy in Central and South Asia" in *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union: Collision and Transformation*, ed. Milan Hauner and Robert L. Canfield (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989), 101.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 105.

Afghanistan's Marxist period began in 1978. When the PDPA overthrew the Daoud regime it signaled the beginning of a descent into chaos. The internal fractures of the PDPA proved to be a severe detriment to its efforts to govern the country. Another severe problem was the general inability of the Afghan Marxists to successfully spread their ideology beyond the intellectuals in the cities to the general masses of the country.⁵⁰ Without these masses, the communist forces lacked the support and the weight they needed to govern successfully.

The incompetence of the Afghan leadership is in many ways what led to the eventual Soviet intervention in the country at the end of 1979. As Soviets were being murdered in the country and fighting was breaking out across nearly all of Afghanistan's provinces, it was clear that for the communist regime to survive, it needed direct Soviet assistance. The strategic location of Afghanistan also provided other reasons for the Soviets to intervene.

Throughout 1979, the Soviets watched as the new communist government of their southern neighbor was locked in a desperate struggle to maintain hold on the country. As events unfolded, with the need to rescue an allied communist government in peril, the successes of similar actions in Iraq, Angola, and Ethiopia fresh in their minds and the possible strategic gains of expanding their influence, it became clear that Soviets would intervene in Afghanistan. The assistance they rendered would come as a late Christmas present to the communists in Kabul, but not to a Mr. Hafizullah Amin.

⁵⁰ Magnus, *Afghanistan: Mullah, Marx and Mujahid*, 98.

III

The Hammer Falls

War is nothing but the continuation of politics by other means.

-Karl von Clausewitz

Two days after Christmas 1979, a special Soviet assault force was moving in for the kill. They surrounded Afghan President Hafizullah Amin's Tap Tajbek Palace and made short work of loyal Afghan forces attempting to defend the Afghan leader. After the last of the resistance broke, Amin and members of his family were unceremoniously killed.⁵¹ For Amin, who had proved more of a nuisance than Moscow wanted to deal with, and the rest of Afghanistan, the hammer had fallen.

Preceding the assault force that eliminated Amin, a massive Soviet airlift moved troops and equipment into the country. Around the same time Amin was being shot in his palace, two Soviet motorized rifle divisions were rumbling into the country from Soviet Uzbekistan to the north and moved quickly to secure major air bases, such as Bagram Air Base, a massive complex located just north of Kabul.⁵² By the first of January 1980, there were conflicting reports about how many Soviet troops were in the country. The New York Times reported that there were about 50,000 troops in the country; the U.S. State

⁵¹ United States Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, *Afghanistan: One Year of Occupation*, Special Report No. 79, February 1981.

⁵² Ibid.

Department estimated between 30,000-40,000.⁵³ By the end of the month, however, the State Department reported that the number had doubled to somewhere around 80,000 men.

Initially, the Soviet focus was on capturing major cities and airbases. Because of their overwhelming military superiority and the fact that what communists there were in Afghanistan were centered in more urban areas, Soviet forces typically had little trouble completing this mission. Another key to the Soviet strategy was the capture of usable airbases. These airbases provided a launching ground for helicopters and fighter airplanes to support ground operations. Soon after the invasion, it was estimated that there were about 200 Soviet aircraft in the country.⁵⁴ With the Soviet hold on the major cities consolidated, they could move outward and begin to pacify the countryside and rural areas.

Almost immediately after the Soviets moved into the country, an armed insurgency began to make itself known. Rebellious forces were already active in the country before the invasion, and carried out acts like the attack on the Soviet advisors in Herat in March of 1979. When the Soviets moved into the country in force, it simply gave them more targets to shoot at and an impetus for recruitment. These insurgent groups most often operated semi-autonomously and were structured along tribal lines. They actually received a large number of their weapons from Afghan Army supplies. By August of 1980 the Soviets realized that crucial anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons they

⁵³ Drew Middleton, "Soviet Phase 2: Consolidating Hold on Afghanistan," *New York Times*, January 1, 1980; U.S. Department of State, *Afghanistan: One Year of Occupation*.

⁵⁴ Middleton, "Soviet Phase 2: Consolidating Hold on Afghanistan."

had given the Afghan Army were ending up in the hands of the insurgents.⁵⁵ In response, the Soviets took away all the weapons they had already distributed and stopped distributions in the future. The Afghan Army would, for numerous reasons, continue to be a thorn in the side of the Soviet military throughout the occupation.

After the Soviets invaded, the Afghan Army splintered. Units in the army that had not supported the Soviet coup broke away and battled the invaders and the Afghan Army units loyal to the Kabul government and their Soviet controllers. Some hooked up with local insurgent groups, others simply dissolved. A December 1980 U.S. State Department report on the situation in Afghanistan said that nearly 75% of the countryside was outside the control of the central government.⁵⁶ There were also numerous skirmishes in the major cities of Kabul, Qandahar, Jalalabad, and Herat. It was clear that for the government in Kabul to have any chance at surviving, the country would have to be thoroughly pacified.

The forces that would carry out the bulk of the pacification of the country were Soviet ground troops, who were heavily supported by Soviet air power. The Afghan Army also worked with the Soviets, but was plagued with incompetence, defections, and corruption. For the Soviet military, the 40th Army and the 103rd Airborne Division were the two major military units on the ground in Afghanistan. Kabul was the center of Soviet power in the country. The 103rd Airborne Division had four regiments, all of which were stationed in Kabul and the surrounding areas.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ United States Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, *Afghanistan: One Year of Occupation*, Special Report No. 79, February 1981.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Vladislav Tamarov, *Afghanistan: Soviet Vietnam*, (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1992), 19.

Airborne divisions within the Soviet Army were considered to be elite units. Unlike the regular army, airborne troops had to be able to operate without outside support units. Thus, they had their own support and logistic units. Aside from perhaps the Special Forces troops, the Spetsnaz, they also received the best training of the Soviet combat units. For regular soldiers “training was just a formality and lasted only a few weeks.” Airborne and Spetsnaz soldiers completed a more intense six-month training course in the Soviet Union.⁵⁸

Once in Afghanistan, Soviet forces took part in different types of action including full-scale offensive operations against known enemy positions, ambushes, and the combing of villages and the countryside for insurgents. For full-scale operations, artillery and air support were almost always used. These operations were employed against known insurgent positions or against large groups of insurgent fighters. Ambushes were often employed when intelligence of specific guerrilla movement was obtained. These ambushes were laid against roads, mountain passes, or other high-traffic areas. Smaller groups of forces often carried out these types of operations and did so with or without air cover and artillery. Throughout all operations, villages and the countryside were constantly combed for anything of value. The Soviet troops especially were looking for weapons caches and insurgent hospitals.⁵⁹

The two most well known weapons that the insurgents employed were rocket launchers such as the popular RPG, or rocket propelled grenade, and the iconic Kalashnikov AK-47 assault rifle. Ironically these were both originally Soviet weapons, and in the Afghan war, they were turned back on their developers. Additional weapons

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 20.

included recoilless light mountain cannons, mortars, and heavy machine guns.⁶⁰ Initially at least, the insurgents lacked effective anti-aircraft weapons and heavy weapons to counter the Soviet's artillery.

Soviet troops used several different kinds of rocket launchers, some guided and some unguided. They, like the Afghan rebels, also carried Kalashnikov rifles. They had two different versions though. The regular army troops carried the AK-47 and the airborne troops carried the newer and more compact AKS-74. In addition to being simply a larger rifle, the AK-47 fired a larger caliber bullet, a 7.62mm round, than the AKS-74, which used a 5.45 mm bullet.⁶¹

The similarities in weapons enabled more convenient replenishment of ammunition for the insurgents. The Afghan guerrillas didn't have the sophisticated supply chains of the Soviets. They could therefore simply rearm with the packs of dead Soviet soldiers or from ammunition stores they managed to capture. This and the fact that many of these weapons were already readily available in the region made them the ideal weapons for the Afghan rebels.

The Soviet ground forces also utilized many different kinds of armored and unarmored motorized vehicles. These included armored troop carriers and T-72 and T-55 main battle tanks. The Afghan insurgents, however, were not so fortunate. Japanese-made pickup trucks were their main vehicle.⁶² While not as well armed or armored as the Soviet vehicles, they could be mounted with a recoilless rifle or heavy machine gun and made into a mobile firing platform. Ultimately, however, the heavily mountainous terrain

⁶⁰ Ibid., 21.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 134.

of many parts of Afghanistan played into the Afghan rebels favor and negated many advantages of the Soviet armored ground forces.

Early in the occupation, the real problem facing the Afghans was Soviet air power. Before the introduction of the American Stinger missile in 1986, the Afghans were essentially at the mercy of the Soviet air strikes. The Soviets used both jet airplanes and helicopters extensively. They used several different varieties of bombers and fighter planes. Helicopters, however, were crucial to the Soviet strategy. There were two main types of helicopters used: the Mi-6, which was used primarily as a transport for troops, ammunition and other supplies, and a fearsome helicopter gunship named the Mi-24. The Mi-24 was also known as the Hind. It carried a crew of two men, a pilot and a weapons officer, with one sitting directly above and behind the other. In addition to the crew it also had a rear troop compartment that could carry up to eight armed soldiers or could also be used to carry stretchers when used in a med-evac role. This cargo/passenger compartment set it apart from nearly all assault helicopters before or since. In terms of armament, the Hind could carry a deadly array of bombs and rockets to complement its cannon and machine gun. Because of its distinct shape, Soviet soldiers often referred to it as the *krokodil* or crocodile, the animal that it loosely resembles.⁶³ Aside from simple strategic and punitive air raids, it provided close air support to Soviet ground operations and often played a supporting role in raids conducted by Soviet Spetsnaz commandos on rebel positions and convoys.⁶⁴ The Hind possessed brute power and its characteristics as a

⁶³ Dwayne A. Day, "Mi-24D Hind 'Krokodil'," U.S. Centennial of Flight Commission, <http://www.centennialofflight.gov/essay/Rotary/Hind/HE18.htm> (accessed January 7, 2008).

⁶⁴ Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 133-134.

helicopter were reasonably well suited for the Afghan terrain. These two factors in combination made it a most detested foe of the Afghan resistance fighters.

It was clear to all that the Soviets had vastly superior firepower and far greater military strength in nearly all aspects. Superior firepower does not always guarantee victory, however, and especially not when wielded by the growingly problematic Soviet Red Army of the 1980s.

From the outset, the Soviets were not prepared to fight, let alone win, a war in Afghanistan. There were problems with the structure of the Soviet military, the ethnic makeup of its soldiers, its training doctrines and war fighting philosophy. Add to these problems a degree of arrogance and the utterly offensive nature of their communist political and social ideology to a large number of devout Muslim Afghans and it is a clear recipe for failure in any attempt to pacify the historically intractable Afghans.

Soviet conventional military policy during the late 1970s is defined by the Cold War. The Soviet military was structured to maintain a constant state of readiness in case that war ever turned hot. Thus the Soviet military is largely built and organized to exchange sledgehammer blows with a major military power such as the United States. They are not fully prepared for the subtleties and finesse necessary in combating an indigenous insurgency such as the one they would be confronted with in Afghanistan.

Once problems started to emerge after the Soviets began to attempt to fit their square armed forces into the round hole of Afghanistan, flexibility to adapt to the situation and the realities on the ground could have provided some relief from the problems they faced. The Soviet military, however, was not known for its flexibility. To a

certain degree, Soviets were aware of the problem: “A related malaise that periodically crops up in Soviet military writing concerns the perils of overconfidence and the danger that inadequate flexibility at the threshold of war could draw the Soviet Union into a cul-de-sac from which graceful extrication would be impossible.”⁶⁵ This quote was written about two years after the Soviets invaded the country yet provides about the best possible summation of the ultimate outcome of the conflict based on the tactics employed by the Soviet military.

The Soviet military that entered Afghanistan at the end of 1979 was a force mainly created by conscription. Soviet conscripts would serve somewhere between two to three years terms of service. As of about the mid-1980s, it was estimated that about 75% of the Soviet armed forces were conscripts. To maintain their manpower levels, the Soviets would have to draft approximately 2.4 million draft-age males annually. The entire male generation born in the Soviet Union in 1967 (those who would be 18 years old in 1985) numbered about 2.2 million.⁶⁶ That total number doesn't account for college students or those that are disabled or otherwise unfit for military service. In the mid-1980s the Soviets were facing a daunting task of maintaining troop levels in their frontline units, let alone their reserve and support units.

Geographically, the Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus make up a large portion of the Soviet Empire. Although new recruits into the Red Army were predominantly of Russian/Slav ethnicity, the percentage of non-Russian and Muslim recruits in the Red

⁶⁵ Benjamin S. Lambeth, “Uncertainties for the Soviet War Planner,” *International Security*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Winter 1982-1983): 157.

⁶⁶ Milan Hauner, “The Soviet Geostrategic Dilemma” in *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union: Collision and Transformation*, ed. Milan Hauner and Robert L. Canfield (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989), 183-184.

Army from Central Asia and the Caucasus was steadily rising. This presented problems for Soviet military commanders. First of all was language. Many of these non-Russian recruits did not speak Russian. If they did, it was often not their first language. Within a military, language barriers can be crippling and lead to a lack of cohesion among units and the soldiers within those units. The Soviet military was seeking to increase the number of non-Russians for their junior officer corps but were hindered in the attempt because the first requirement for the corps was fluency in Russian.⁶⁷ Aside from the internal problems of communication, having a shared ethnicity or religious faith with your adversary can lead to problems of loyalty.

During the Afghan war, the Soviets were dealing with an empire-wide manpower crisis within their ranks and an influx of essentially foreign recruits from non-Russian backgrounds, and the Soviets were still managing to make their situation worse. The problem with the Afghan scenario was that the non-Russian and Muslim recruits who were joining the Red Army, largely through forced conscriptions, had closer religious and ethnic ties to the people of Afghanistan than to the Russians. Although perhaps not openly mutinous, Muslim units were often seen to present a greater danger for defections or for penetration by elements of the enemy than the homogeneous Russian units. Muslim soldiers, with many shared ties to the enemy they were fighting and little or no motivation beyond following their superior officer's (who were almost always Russians) orders, there was often much room for sympathy with their enemy, fellow members of the Islamic *umma*, or Islamic community. In addition to the non-Russian and Muslim soldiers in the military, popular support for the war among the families and friends that

⁶⁷ Hauner, "The Soviet Geostrategic Dilemma," 185.

these soldiers left behind was also often tied to ethnicity and religion. The incompatible relationship between the enemy that the Soviets were fighting and the ethnic make-up of their military served to undermine the Soviet efforts in Afghanistan.

After they had assassinated Afghan president Amin in his palace, the Soviets installed Babrak Karmal as his successor. Karmal was the head of the Parcham faction that before the invasion had vied for power with Amin and his Khalq faction. Karmal returned to Kabul after being forced into exile by the Khalqis in July 1978.⁶⁸ Karmal was faced with several main problems as the new leader of Afghanistan. One was to smooth over the rifts between the Parcham and Khalq factions in government, which were still causing problems. The other was to get the Afghan people to accept the Soviets in the country. He failed miserably on both fronts. The Afghan people were largely still disillusioned with Marxist rule after the disastrous reform attempts of previous regimes. Any leader that had close ties with the Soviets, as Karmal did, was not going to be supported by the vast majority of the Afghan people.⁶⁹

The Khalq and Parcham split also continued to divide two vital aspects of Afghan society: the political realm and the military. The military was largely Khalq and between June and October 1980 there were reports of three different coup plots that originated within the military establishment.⁷⁰ The Kabul government needed the military desperately to maintain control in the country. Political differences between the military and the government crippled this crucial relationship.

⁶⁸ United States Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, *Afghanistan: One Year of Occupation*, Special Report No. 79, February 1981.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

The situation in Afghanistan was rapidly devolving. The Soviet military, once the invaders, had now turned into the occupiers. The government in Kabul moved even closer to the Soviets and continued to squabble internally over political differences, ruining their credibility and further alienating the Afghan people. The Afghan Army was disintegrating. Out of this growing chaos, a grassroots insurgency swept the country. They were fueled by many factors such as hatred of Soviets and the Kabul government and their Marxist ways, Afghan national pride, Islam, and freedom. Local groups sprung up to oppose the occupiers and these fighters soon became known as the “warriors of god,” or mujahideen.

IV

God's Warriors

*We are but warriors for the working-day
Our gayness and our gilt are all besmirch'd
With rainy marching in the painful field...
But, by the mass, our hearts are in the trim.*

-William Shakespeare *Henry V*

Those who opposed the Soviets in Afghanistan were given the blanket term mujahideen, or warriors of God. While this is an explicitly religious term, and many did in fact fight for Islam, the resistance fighters took up arms for different reasons and not only for religious ones. Some fought simply to oust the foreign invaders from their lands. Others fought because they hated the communist government in Kabul and the Soviets they had brought into the country. Other reasons were more personal, such as a vendetta to atone for a murdered family member or relative. Others were simply bored peasants from backwater villages looking for excitement. And then there were those who took up arms in the name of Islam.

Theirs was a holy mission, to cleanse Muslim Afghanistan of the atheist communists. There was a jihad, a holy war, in the face of one of the most powerful nations on earth. In the West, many accounts of the mujahideen have given them an almost mythic quality. The dark-skinned, wild bearded and turbaned tribesman in flowing robes wielding an AK-47 was the image of an Islamic fighter that was burned into the consciousness of so many in the West unfamiliar with the region, the conflict, or the

culture out of which many of these fighters came. In many ways, the image, however, is not that far off.

The Afghan mujahideen evolved greatly during the war, both through experience fighting the Soviets and by aid and intervention by outside governments. They went from ragtag local militias to a loose confederation of moderately well organized guerrilla groups. The technology and firepower at their disposal multiplied exponentially:

...the first stage of the jihad began in 1978, the fighters carried Enfield rifles, even rusting sabers, and few were organized into anything more than village units. By 1989, when the Soviet military left, field commanders communicated by satellite telephones, and Stingers were the elite weapon of the day.⁷¹

Despite the evolution, the backbone of the mujahideen remained Islam. It provided the banner under which all these fighters gathered. It was a natural rallying point.

Afghanistan was, after all, a traditionally devout Muslim country. The jihad drew volunteers from all over the Muslim world, yet it remained an Afghan war.

While the Afghans were perhaps one of the most well known examples of these Islamic fighters, they are by no means the only example from history. In the past hundred years alone, Muslims in Algeria, Palestine, Chechnya, and Bosnia have all waged armed conflicts under the banner of jihad.⁷² Some of these movements had better scholarly religious justification than others but the foundation of their ideology was Islam.

The concept of jihad comes from the classical Arabic of the Qu'ran. Traditionally, the term means "those who strive" on the path to God.⁷³ The Prophet Muhammad

⁷¹ Magnus, *Afghanistan: Mullah, Marx, and Mujahid*, 149.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 135.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 136.

described jihad as an inward seeking quest to make oneself a better Muslim; it does not necessarily involve militant violence.⁷⁴ In more recent years, however, the meaning of jihad has been warped by extremists to include a more militant agenda. With this new definition, Islamic fighters seek religious justification, and therefore wider acceptance within the Muslim world, for their actions.

The jihad waged in Afghanistan was a movement to rid the Muslim nation of its atheist foreign oppressor. It was a fight for the traditions of Afghan society and for the predominance of Islam and self-governance. To implement the reforms needed to secure a communist state in Afghanistan, the Soviets needed to completely turn Afghan society upside down. They would have had to restructure the society to fit within a Marxist framework that would allow for communist governance. The Afghans, always suspicious of outsiders and skeptical to their designs on Afghan society, would have none of this.

The process by which the traditional culture of Afghanistan would be removed to make way for the Soviet system of Communism was outlined by three stages: Islam was to be removed from its preeminent place in Afghan society, Soviet ways of life were pressed onto the populace, and Afghan cultural identity was to be destroyed “by the emphasis on so-called nationalities, with the result that that country was split into different ethnic groups, with no language, religion, or culture in common.”⁷⁵ This process can be called “sovietization.” In the Afghan case, “sovietization...is the process by which

⁷⁴ Ahmed Rashid. *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 2.

⁷⁵ Oliver Roy “The *Mujahedin* and the Preservation of Afghan Culture” in *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union: Collision and Transformation*, ed. Milan Hauner and Robert L. Canfield (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989), 40.

Afghanistan should be made to look like the Soviet Muslim republics....”⁷⁶ The Soviet effort in Afghanistan can be separated into two different parts. The first is pacification, and the second is “sovietization.” Without the first part successfully carried out, it was not possible to implement the second. The Soviets ran into major problems while they were still in the pacification phase. The mujahideen were the cause of these problems.

According to Vladislav Tamarov, a Soviet airborne soldier who served in the war, there were three different kinds of mujahideen fighter. The first were simply involved for the money. They were paid different amounts for different targets. Typical amounts were between 5,000 to 10,000 Afghanis for killing a Soviet soldier, 10,000 to 20,000 for a Soviet officer, and around 100,000 for a tank or aircraft. In the end, “war is a business.” The Western media did not heavily report on this type of mujahideen fighter, but Tamarov states they were often reported on in the Soviet press. The second type of fighter was attempting to rid their country of the foreign invaders. This type was frequently featured in the Western press, but ignored by the Soviets. The third type described by Tamarov were pressed men. According to Tamarov, mujahideen groups would come into villages and take men away to fill their ranks. This is disputed by other sources, however, which claim that there was no need to coerce men into service as fighting was seen as an honorable act in society.⁷⁷ Either way, if these men hadn’t been pressed into service with the mujahideen, it’s most likely they would have eventually

⁷⁶ Oliver Roy “The Sovietization of Afghanistan” in *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union: Collision and Transformation*, ed. Milan Hauner and Robert L. Canfield (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989), 48.

⁷⁷ Pierre Allan; Albert A. Stahel, “Tribal Guerrilla Warfare Against a Colonial Power: Analyzing the War in Afghanistan,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (December 1983): 599.

been conscripted into the Afghan Army, which did carry out forced recruitment.⁷⁸ These three groups provide a very broad framework for the makeup of the mujahideen forces. In truth, men often fought for unique, individual reasons.

The reasons that caused men to fight in the Afghan jihad were not just in Afghanistan, they were also present elsewhere. Ultimately led by a tall Saudi millionaire named Osama bin Laden, Arabs from across the Muslim world traveled to Afghanistan to fight. Bin Laden was the seventeenth son of Mohammed bin Laden, who had moved to Saudi Arabia from Yemen in 1931. Mohammed established a construction company and gained the favor of the Saudi royal family, which was just beginning to benefit from the tidal wave of oil money pouring into the kingdom. Mohammed profited enormously from this relationship and his company was given prime construction contracts around the kingdom. While Osama's siblings left for schooling in America and Europe, Osama stayed in Saudi Arabia and attended King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah. In 1979, the same year as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the world's future most well known terrorist and cave dweller was a sophomore in college with a \$1 million annual allowance. He graduated college with a degree in economics and public administration and at some point after graduation, likely in 1981, made his way to Pakistan.⁷⁹ Once there he met with mujahideen leaders and sowed the seeds of his future fame. Bin Laden eventually ascended to lead the contingent of Arabs who made their way to Afghanistan and Pakistan to fight.

⁷⁸ Vladislav Tamarov, *Afghanistan: Soviet Vietnam*, (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1992), 116-117.

⁷⁹ Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 84-86.

Although they were fighting for essentially the same goal, the Arabs and the Afghans didn't always see eye-to-eye and often didn't mix with each other. Peter Jouvenal, a Western journalist in the region, said that "One Afghan told me, 'whenever we had a problem with one of them [the Arabs] we just shot them. They thought they were kings.'" Milt Bearden, who ran the CIA's Afghan operation in the late 1980s, echoed Jouvenal's account, saying the Afghan Arabs were "very disruptive...the Afghans thought they were a pain in the ass."⁸⁰ Much of the dislike between the Afghans and the Arabs who had come to fight was based on the attitude of the Arabs, who believed their version of Islam to be ultra-pure. They saw Afghan Islam as tainted by traces of mysticism and Sufism and thus inferior to their own beliefs. Peter Bergen describes the attitude of the Arabs as "holier-than-thou."⁸¹ Although the Afghans did not appreciate the interference and strong opinions of their Arab visitors, they did appreciate the money that came with them.

Despite the fact the number of Arabs that would eventually fight in Afghanistan was relatively small, the sums of money that Arabs donated were not. The money came in different forms. It came in the form of cash and weapons, but it also came in the form of hundreds of religious schools, or madrassahs, that were built along the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. They were set up with the full support of the Pakistani dictator Mohammed Zia-ul-Haq, and they were placed in or near Afghan refugee camps, where millions of Afghans had fled from the Soviets.⁸² In these schools, Afghan boys were brainwashed by Wahabi and Deobandi imams, representatives of two of the harshest and

⁸⁰ Peter L. Bergen, *Holy War Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden*, (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 65.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 86.

most intolerant sects of Sunni Islam. Deobandism has its roots in 19th century India and advocates armed jihad, the restricted role of women, and Deobandis abhor Shia Muslims. Wahhabism came out of the Nejd, the bleak central region of Saudi Arabia in the 18th century and is similarly intolerant and especially so against Sufism, a mystical strand of Islam that is common in Afghanistan and Central Asia.⁸³ Wahhabism is also the state creed of Saudi Arabia. Imbued with intolerance and rigid Islamic orthodoxy, these young Afghans would in later years form the core of the Taliban but during the Soviet war provided manpower for the resistance. They were created by the checkbooks of wealthy Arabs and by donations worldwide to Islamic charities whose proceeds were then secretly funneled to Pakistan. The funds flowing in from outside were vital to the survival and success of the mujahideen and the Afghan resistance.

Despite the international assistance, resisting the Soviets was in many ways still a local affair. Guerrilla units were often organized by region. Tribal and religious elders made the major decisions.⁸⁴ Many men who fought in the resistance also had obligations to maintain to their household and their crops or herds. Many mujahideen fighters were part-time and went back and forth between home and the war. This type of organization does not lend itself to large conventional battles. The war in Afghanistan's principle feature is that it lacked established fronts.⁸⁵ There are no clearly defined front lines. This is primarily because of the disparity between the outright strength of Soviet Army forces and the guerrillas. The mujahideen had the ability to meld with the populace as well as go

⁸³ Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, 44-45.

⁸⁴ Pierre Allan; Albert A. Stahel, "Tribal Guerrilla Warfare Against a Colonial Power: Analyzing the War in Afghanistan," 599.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 603.

back and forth between fighting and living their pre-war lives. This is an immeasurable advantage and one that frustrated the Soviets, who were constantly unable to pin down their enemy.

Despite their innate flexibility and patchwork nature, after several years of conflict the mujahideen groups recognized a need to organize into larger parties for better coordination of offensive operations as well as receiving the aid that was pouring in from outside sources. Pakistan provided the venue to do this. As early as January of 1980, nearly twenty different groups had arisen in the western Pakistani cities of Peshawar and Quetta.⁸⁶ These two cities, especially Peshawar, would continue to be important centers to the Afghan resistance. Three groups that would quickly rise to prominence were Professor Burhanudin Rabbani's Jamiat-i-Islami (Islamic Society) party, and two factions of the Hezb-i-Islami (Islamic Party) party, one led by Maulawi Younis Khaless and the other led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.⁸⁷ These parties created a more centralized leadership within the Afghan resistance.

Professor Rabbani was a soft-spoken intellectual, but his group was probably the most well known among the rebels for their military prowess. This was because Rabbani's main military commander was Ahmad Shah Massoud. Like Rabbani, Massoud was a Tajik from northern Afghanistan. He was a brilliant tactical commander and a charismatic leader. Massoud and Rabbani's forces operated primarily out of the Panjshir Valley, north of Kabul. Their choice of a home base was a good one, as Massoud's forces

⁸⁶ Edward Giradet, *Afghanistan: The Soviet War*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 167.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.

had survived eight major Soviet offensives by 1984.⁸⁸ Throughout the war, Massoud and his forces were a constant threat that the Soviets were never able to fully deal with. It would take over a decade after the Soviets left Afghanistan, but Massoud would finally be brought down. Two days before September 11, 2001, two fanatical Arabs posing as television journalists assassinated him with an explosive television camera. The plot was carried out by al-Qaeda, most likely as a favor to their hosts in Afghanistan, the Taliban, who at the time were locked in a desperate struggle with Massoud's Northern Alliance forces for control of the country. To this day, however, many Afghans remember Massoud as the symbol of the Afghan resistance to the Soviet occupation of their country.

Another major mujahideen group, Younis Khaled's Hezb-i-Islami group, was predominantly Pashtun and thus represented the ethnic majority of Afghanistan. Although they cultivated the image of being a group based on fundamental Islam, Khaled's Hezb-i-Islami was primarily a tribally structured group, keeping with their Pashtun roots.⁸⁹ Khaled was known as the "fighting mullah" and was into his sixties when the Soviets invaded. He was an Islamic cleric and schoolteacher and based his group in Afghanistan's Nangarhar Province.⁹⁰ Nangarhar is located to the east of Kabul just across the border from the Pakistani city of Peshawar. To be closer to his men and the fighting, Khaled wanted to move his headquarters from Pakistani Peshawar across the border into Afghanistan. The Pakistanis flatly refused. They needed him to remain, at least in image, in Peshawar to maintain a semblance of a united front with the numerous other groups

⁸⁸ Ibid., 76.

⁸⁹ Robert D. Kaplan, *Soldiers of God: With the Mujahidin in Afghanistan*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), 42.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 168-169.

headquartered there.⁹¹ Along with Massoud's forces, Khaled's group was considered to be the most militarily formidable of the insurgent groups. They were doing real damage to the Soviets and their Afghan allies.

Early on in the war, it was clear that the mujahideen were militarily just barely keeping their heads above water, although creating a fair share of headaches for Soviet military commanders. The United States government, however, did not have concrete faith in the rebels' ability to overcome the Soviets. A presidential document that was reauthorized by President Ronald Reagan in 1981 allowed the American Central Intelligence Agency to supply the mujahideen with weapons. The Americans had watched the situation in Afghanistan develop and decided to get involved. They would work with the Pakistanis, who would serve as their liaisons in the region. The Americans also saw Afghanistan as an opportunity to hit back at the Soviets in retaliation for financing the North Vietnamese in the Vietnam War. It was an opportunity too good to pass up: "President Jimmy Carter's national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, put it succinctly: it was time, he said, 'to finally sow shit in their backyard.'"⁹²

⁹¹ Kaplan, *Soldiers of God: With the Mujahidin in Afghanistan*, 42.

⁹² Peter L. Bergen, *Holy War Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden*, 63.

V

Gunrunners

*Can it possibly be any better than buying bullets
from the Chinese to use to shoot Russians?*

-CIA officer involved in the Afghan Program⁹³

Howard Hart loved guns. In his home in the United States he possessed one of the CIA's largest private collections of weapons, including everything from knives to rifles to artillery shells. Hart was the CIA chief of station in Islamabad, Pakistan when it was decided the Americans would get involved in the Soviet-Afghan War. During his time in Pakistan he was able to oversee the transfer of more weapons than he could ever count. He arrived in Pakistan to begin his tour in May of 1981. While there he ran the conduit between the CIA and the Afghan rebels. He oversaw weapons shipments, evaluated the effectiveness of certain types of weapons from battlefield reports, and oversaw secret training programs for Afghan rebels.⁹⁴

Hart and the CIA's partner in this venture was the Pakistani intelligence service, the Inter-Services Intelligence, or ISI. The Pakistani dictator, General Mohammed Zia-ul-Haq made it clear that all American aid would pass through Pakistan, which would thus have control over distribution of funds and weapons. This often meant that the Pakistani distributors played favorites and tended to bestow greater support on those groups it saw

⁹³ Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 66.

⁹⁴ Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 53-55.

as the most Islamist and pro-Pakistan. In previous years, it was known that the ISI had been infiltrated by a number of ultra-orthodox Muslims. While the U.S. relinquished control over the ultimate distribution, they gained the element of deniability by going through Pakistan.⁹⁵

The CIA's Pakistani operation was small and their Afghan operation was nonexistent. They had very few direct contacts with Afghans and only had six officers in Pakistan at any given time.⁹⁶ To serve their purpose, however, the CIA didn't necessarily need a large number of officers in country. The Americans were simply spending lots and lots of money, and then relying on the Pakistanis to get it where it needed to go.

The CIA's mission in working with the Pakistanis was to kill Soviets and the method for doing so was supplying the Afghan rebels with weapons. With Howard Hart's blessing, the first weapons shipped into Pakistan were bolt-action .303 Lee Enfield rifles. This weapon was a standard infantry weapon for the British until about 1950. It had an antiquated design but Hart, the weapons expert and aficionado, preferred them to the AK-47 because they were more accurate and packed a heavier punch. The CIA purchased them from Greece and India, as well as other places, and shipped them to Pakistan for distribution. Another weapon that made it to Pakistan early on was the RPG-7. Originally a Soviet weapon, thousands were purchased from Egypt and China. They were cheap and possessed a favorable carrying weight to firepower ratio.⁹⁷ Later, the aid extended to include more powerful and modern weapons. AK-47s were purchased from China, mortars and 12.7-millimeter heavy machine guns (the Soviet equivalent of the American

⁹⁵ Bergen, *Holy War Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden*, 64.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁹⁷ Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 58.

.50-caliber machine gun) were also included and thousands were shipped to Pakistan. In a further effort to maintain deniability, weapons made in communist or Eastern-bloc countries were purchased on the global arms markets by CIA officers and then shipped in. It was fairly clear to the CIA that some elements of their Pakistani partners were profiting off of the huge volume of cash and weapons that were now flooding their country. Because of the sheer size of the aid and the lack of CIA manpower for proper auditing, a certain degree of losses and skimming of profit must have been accepted as part of their deal with the Pakistanis. The CIA did the best they could though and one method they employed was using paid agents to monitor gun prices on the local arms markets to try to get inkling if guns were being dropped for cash.⁹⁸

All the weapons and money that the CIA was providing presented a possibly dangerous diplomatic situation should the true source of the aid become known to the Soviets. A benefit of going through Pakistan was that it allowed the CIA to leave nearly all political dealings with the insurgent groups to the Pakistani ISI and the CIA could focus on its mission of indirectly harassing the Soviets. The Pakistanis made the best use of the unique opportunity that this presented them.

The Pakistanis were all of a sudden awash with cash and weapons, two things that numerous groups along the Afghan frontier were in desperate need of. This put the Pakistanis in a very powerful position, and they took full advantage of it. When they were making their distributions they were selective in who received the aid they were handing out. By favoring groups that were either Islamist and or pro-Pakistani they could affect the balance of power among the mujahideen groups and thus extend their influence into

⁹⁸ Ibid., 66-67.

Afghanistan. Most of the mujahideen leaders that Pakistan supported were linked with the ultra-Islamic Muslim Brotherhood. Among their favorites was Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and his faction of the Hezb-i-Islami party. Hekmatyar's group was known to be the most "controversial and radical" of the resistance groups. Vehemently anti-Soviet and anti-American, Hekmatyar displayed fervent devotion to militant Islam. His fundamentalist Islamic views are what most endeared him to the Pakistanis. His group, however, was in some ways just as much a threat to other resistance groups as it was to the Soviets. On numerous occasions Hekmatyar's followers have been accused of attacks on other rebel groups and sowing dissention among the mujahideen. Although conflicts and territorial disputes between different groups were present throughout the conflict and between nearly all the different groups, the repeated nature of Hekmatyar's actions have singled his party out as a particular menace. Regardless of Hekmatyar's controversial actions, the Pakistani dictator had deftly played his hand. He managed to secure the vast resources of the U.S. while maintaining firm control over the crucial distribution process and at the same time solidifying his own country's geopolitical interests.

The Pakistani dictator, Mohammed Zia-ul-Haq, was a member of Britain's colonial army in 1947 when India gained independence. He was a Punjabi Muslim but born on the Indian side of where the border between Pakistan and India would later be drawn. After the territory was split, he, along with millions of other Muslims, left for the newly created Pakistan. Zia was thoroughly marked by the British colonial experience and "his family spoke with British accents and bandied slang as if in a Wiltshire country house." His father had been a civil servant in the British government but was also an

Islamic teacher.⁹⁹ This combination of secular politics and Islam was ultimately mirrored in the formation of the Pakistani state. Pakistan's founder, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, attempted to keep Pakistan a secular democracy colored by traces of Islam. Jinnah, however, died relatively early in Pakistan's history and the country remained plagued by problems such as different ideas as to the role Islam should play in society, vast income gaps, an often belligerent and restive western border with Afghanistan, and territorial divisions.¹⁰⁰ In addition to these problems, Pakistan's mortal enemy, India, was located right next door. In the years following independence, the Pakistani Army fought three wars with India and out of these conflicts military officers of the Punjabi ethnicity became a leading group within the country and within the realm of Pakistani politics. It was out of this group that Zia ultimately emerged and ruled the country after 1977.

Heavily influenced by his British-steeped upbringing, Zia was a devout Muslim but not a fanatical one. He was more politician than religious leader. He encouraged piety and religious devotion but did not go so far as to create a government agency to enforce religious devotion, such as the one seen in Saudi Arabia. He also kept Islamic scholars and clergy out of the government.¹⁰¹ What he did do, however, was actively support the hundreds of madrassahs set up along the western frontier with Afghanistan. These schools were churning out hundreds of boys and young men brainwashed into fanatical Islam. He saw the schools on the frontier as creating a sort of "...Islamic ideological picket fence between communist Afghanistan and Pakistan."¹⁰² Zia quickly saw the value in the unswerving faith of these young men and, for those who chose to fight, their

⁹⁹ Ibid., 60.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 60-61.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 61.

¹⁰² Ibid.

absolute belief in the jihad they were undertaking. They could be used as weapons to keep the Soviets in check, as well as project Pakistani influence into neighboring Afghanistan. It was after all the Pakistani intelligence service, the ISI, which served as the Pakistani hand controlling the Afghan rebels.

Akhtar Abdul Rahman was the director-general of the ISI. A former artillery officer in the Pakistani military, he was one of Zia's most trusted officers and was tapped to lead the ISI in June of 1979 and would serve in the position for eight years. His mission, he was told by Zia, was to "draw the CIA in and hold them at bay."¹⁰³ He met regularly with Howard Hart and they worked together in keeping the flow of arms pouring in.

Despite the weapons and money that were so clearly entering into Afghanistan via Pakistan, by 1983 the Pakistanis were on some fronts still outwardly denying their involvement. In a letter to the editor in the *New York Times*, the Minister of Information at the Pakistani embassy in Washington wrote "...Pakistan has continued to resist all efforts that would make it a conduit of arms for the mujahideen in Afghanistan."¹⁰⁴ Despite the façade, Pakistan was in up to its neck in weapons and cash destined for the anti-Soviet, Islamic mujahideen fighters.

The Soviets that the mujahideen were fighting were having more than their fair share of problems. Not only were they on the receiving end of all the weapons flooding into Pakistan, they were being crippled by the communists in Kabul and by their military ally, the Afghan Army. The Kabul government was completely dependant on the Soviet military to maintain their grip on the country, as tenuous as that grip was. The Kabul

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁰⁴ *New York Times*, Letters to the Editor, November 8, 1983.

government claimed such narrow support among the populace and controlled so little territory in the country that to call them the true government of Afghanistan would be something of a misnomer. They did hold the capital, Kabul, traditionally the enclave of the country's rulers, but they hardly held enough influence to resolutely justify their claim to leadership.

The Afghan Army was a painful ally for the Soviet military. On one hand, they were needed to maintain something of an Afghan face on the government forces; on the other hand, they were beset by corruption, defections, and incompetence. Often times, they did just as much harm to the Soviets, through defections and by selling weapons to the rebels, as assistance they provided. By the mid-1980s, however, the Soviets were in Afghanistan for the long haul. In the face of a violent insurgency and international outrage, they had entrenched themselves in the country. As time passed, however, the problems would only get worse, and staying became less and less of a favorable option.

VI

Chasing Shadows

The quickest way of ending a war is to lose it.

-George Orwell

By 1986 the communist Afghan government owed its very existence, and any future existence it would be lucky enough to enjoy, to Moscow. Two-thirds of the countryside was under the control of the mujahideen and “much of the rest was virtually constant war zones.”¹⁰⁵ It enjoyed almost no recognition internationally and in addition, the large majority of the world’s nations condemned events taking place in Afghanistan. The leader that the Soviets had installed soon after they invaded, Babrak Karmal, had not been able to surmount the fantastic challenge presented to him in ruling the country. The middle of the decade was a period of changes within the conflict, the ruling elite of Kabul and of Moscow.

In November of 1982, the Leonid Brezhnev era in the Soviet Union came to an end. He had ruled the country since 1964. Many believed that Brezhnev had been left behind by the times. His ultimate successor, Mikhail Gorbachev, said in his memoirs that:

...the most important thing about Brezhnevism was its failure to meet the challenges of the time. Through its blind adherence to old dogmas and obsolete ideas the leadership overlooked the far-reaching changes that were taking place in

¹⁰⁵ Magnus, *Afghanistan: Mullah, Marx, and Mujahid*, 130.

science and technology, and in the life and activity of the people, and they ignored the transformation that were occurring in other countries.¹⁰⁶

When he died, Brezhnev left strained Soviet relations with much of the Middle East. The Soviets had traditionally attempted to cultivate their relations with the Arabs in the Middle East but in recent years the relationship had become troubled. In addition to a military-centered invasion and occupation of Muslim Afghanistan, the Soviet Union had done nothing during the Israeli incursion into Lebanon in 1982. The other major event that strained relations was that Soviet weapons had received poor reviews when used in action by the Syrians.¹⁰⁷ These types of weapons sales were crucial to the Soviet economy and the cash they raised was extremely valuable to Moscow. The fact that Arabs were now questioning their weapons suppliers was deeply troubling to Moscow. Weapons were Moscow's primary form of influence in the Middle East.¹⁰⁸ Brezhnev's successor, Yuri Andropov, inherited these problems, as well as others when he assumed control of the Soviet Union.

In the twenty-eight months between November 1982 and March 1985, the Soviet Union had two leaders: Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko. Both suffered health problems and both were relative placeholders until Mikhail Gorbachev assumed power in 1985. While not making much in terms of major changes, they both had influence in the relations between the Soviet Union and the Middle East. Andropov sent missiles to Syria, and thus accelerated the Syrian-Israeli arms race and Chernenko made diplomatic advances to Jordan and Kuwait in an attempt to bring these countries closer in with the

¹⁰⁶ Mikhail Gorbachev, *Memoirs*, (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 138.

¹⁰⁷ Robert O. Freedman, *Moscow and the Middle East: Soviet Policy Since the Invasion of Afghanistan*, 148.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

Soviet Union.¹⁰⁹ This interim period came to an end when Chernenko died early in 1985. In March of that year, Mikhail Gorbachev became the leader of the Soviet Union and would lead the country into its final days.

Changes were also afoot in Kabul. The Soviets, frustrated with Karmal's lack of success in winning over the country, were growing tired. In May of 1986 they replaced Karmal with Mohammed Najibullah. Najibullah was the former head of the Khadamat-I Ittila'at-I Daulati (Dari for "State Information Service"). The organization was most commonly known as the KhAD. It was organized and trained largely by the KGB, the feared Soviet intelligence and secret police service. Najibullah was a Parchami like Karmal and had actually served in Karmal's bodyguard detail prior to the invasion.¹¹⁰ While Najibullah was a surprise choice to many to replace Karmal, from the Soviet perspective it made sense. He was a Parchami, thus closer to the Soviets and he was a Pashtun and could ethnically identify with the majority of Afghans. The other main reason was simply one of competence. Najibullah had been the head of the security service, which was "...the most efficient entity in a regime not noted for its efficiency."¹¹¹ A principal factor of Karmal's reign and one that spilled over into Najibullah's was the infighting between the Khalq and Parcham factions of government. It severely limited the proper functioning of the government. Ironically, the removal of Karmal created yet another faction. Supporters of Karmal began to arise within the Parcham party and they staged demonstrations and were eventually exiled to the Soviet Union.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Magnus, *Afghanistan: Mullah, Marx, and Mujahid*, 131.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 132.

When Mikhail Gorbachev became the leader of the Soviet Union, he started out his reign by turning up the pressure on the Afghan war. He began by trying to seal the border with Pakistan using Spetsnaz commandos. Mujahideen supply routes were identified and monitored for activity. A mandate of complete destruction was continued for territories that were in mujahideen control. Despite the Soviet efforts, the mujahideen still retained strong connections to Pakistan. It soon became clear to all, however, that these methods were not working.

Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika* were in full effect and neither would allow for the continuation of the Afghan war. An essay by a Soviet dissident named Andrei Sakharov titled "The Necessity of Perestroika" mentioned the incongruity of the Afghan war and the policy of perestroika. He wrote that perestroika was "'like a war. Victory is a necessity.' To even begin that war, he wrote, the leadership had to end the folly in Afghanistan."¹¹² Gorbachev realized that there was no possibility for harmony between the Afghan war and his revolutionary new policies. Another change was in the offing, and this one would be an overhaul to how the Soviets approached the war.

The third major change in the middle part of the decade, after regime changes in both capitals, dealt with the Soviet approach to the conflict. In the years prior to Gorbachev, the Soviets had been focused on a military solution to end the conflict. It was a military war that was winnable by military means. After six years of war, the Soviets began to rethink this strategy. They began to view a political solution as being the most likely outcome of the conflict.¹¹³ The mujahideen were proving a slippery foe for the

¹¹² David Remnick, *Lenin's Tomb: The Last Days of the Soviet Empire*, (New York: Random House, 1993), 117.

¹¹³ Magnus, *Afghanistan: Mullah, Marx, and Mujahid*, 128.

Soviet military and their guerrilla tactics and unconventional fighting philosophy was giving the Soviet military fits. They were failing to make the necessary adaptations to meet the challenge they faced in what Gorbachev would later call the “hopeless military adventure in Afghanistan.”¹¹⁴

In preparations for the invasion and early on in the war, the Soviet high command hoped that the Soviet military would play a supporting role in Afghanistan. They would provide muscle and advanced technological firepower to compliment the Afghan Army.¹¹⁵ Very quickly, this hope fell by the wayside. The Afghan Army was an example of incompetence in its highest form. Beset by serial defections, the Afghan Army was chronically short of serviceable soldiers. Huge forced recruitment drives were taken up which “inflated the army’s size but did little to improve its effectiveness.”¹¹⁶ Many of its soldiers therefore did not want to fight and many were partially trained at best. Furthermore, many Afghan soldiers felt a greater loyalty to the tribal leaders of the resistance groups whom they were to fight. Ahmed Shah Massoud, the famous Tajik mujahideen commander in the north once said that he often had to persuade Afghan soldiers not to defect because they were more valuable to him as informers within the army.¹¹⁷ In addition to providing information to the rebels, mujahideen sympathizers within the army also occasionally provided arms.¹¹⁸ This has been especially troubling in the case of Soviet heavy weaponry and specialized weapons such as surface-to-air

¹¹⁴ Gorbachev, *Memoirs*, 138.

¹¹⁵ Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 114.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹¹⁸ United States Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, *Afghanistan: Seven Years of Soviet Occupation*, Special Report No. 155, December 1986.

missiles. The mujahideen often sorely lacked these types of weapons and but when they had them it allowed them to be on more equal footing with the Soviets, whose attacks often makes heavy use of helicopters and planes in a close air support role. Aside from problems facing their enemy, the army is also plagued by infighting relating to the Parcham/Khalq divide. The military is predominantly Khalq but conflicts still spilled over from politics into the military. Relatively quickly it was clear to the Soviets that their hope of playing a supporting role in Afghanistan was just wishful thinking. They soon undertook the brunt of the fighting themselves.

The Afghan war was unpopular nearly everywhere in the world. Afghanistan's three immediate neighbors aside from the Soviet Union all opposed the war. Pakistan was serving as the conduit for international aid to the resistance and hosted the Islamic schools that were churning out the religious warriors to fight the Soviets. China saw the occupation of Afghanistan to be a "major obstacle" to the improvement of the strained relations between the two countries. Iran had improved relations with the Soviet Union but still called for the unconditional withdrawal of Soviet forces from the country. Opposition to the war extended beyond the Afghans immediate neighborhood, however. By the end of 1986 the United Nations had voted eight times for a resolution calling for the removal of all Soviet forces from the country and the restoration of Afghan sovereignty. The resolution passed by a large majority each time. A vote in November of 1986 was 122 to 20 in favor of the resolution. World opinion was not in favor of the Soviets.

By 1986 public opinion in the Soviet Union was tepid at best. Public response was “mostly passive and unenthusiastic.”¹¹⁹ However it’s likely that this is largely because inside the Soviet Union so little was reported on the war in the first place. As the years passed there was a campaign of mounting opposition to the engagement. Ironically, in an attempt to increase public support for the war, around 1986 the Soviet media expanded their coverage of the war. The war was portrayed with greater depth, profiles of soldiers were published in hometown newspapers, and examples of heroism were spotlighted. It is likely, however, that as the Soviet populace learned more about the conflict, this tactic to improve public support backfired. For example, in the second half of the decade, the number of draft evasions in the Soviet Union increased. This is a major problem for an army built upon conscription.¹²⁰ Soviet public opinion was well on its way down a very slippery slope.

The United States response to the invasion began with sanctions and diplomatic stabs rather than outright force. President Jimmy Carter “imposed a partial grain embargo, limited the sale of high-technology equipment, withdrew the SALT II treaty from Senate consideration, and cancelled American participation in the Moscow Olympics.”¹²¹ In addition to direct action against the Soviet Union, the United States also used the opportunity to try to curry favor with nations in the Middle East and South Asia. The war in Afghanistan was in many ways an extension of the Vietnam War. It was a Cold War proxy war fought in the Third World. Occurring in a clearly bipolar world, both the Vietnam War and the Afghan war are examples of battles fought by the two

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Robert O. Freedman, *Moscow and the Middle East: Soviet Policy Since the Invasion of Afghanistan*, 73.

superpowers for the numerous wild card nations of the Third World. Both wars were fought indirectly, thus maintaining the “cold” status of the Cold War. Although the U.S. response to the invasion began slowly, it soon took off to the point where the United States, along with others, was financing and equipping the rebels that were ultimately killing Soviet soldiers. The U.S. eventually made the leap, just as the Soviets did in Vietnam, to using force in the form of cash and guns.

By 1986 the war in Afghanistan had been overhauled. Leadership for the communist side had been completely changed over. Brezhnev and Karmal had given way to Gorbachev and Najibullah. Due to readily apparent necessities both in Afghanistan and abroad, the Soviet strategy had moved from seeking a military victory in Afghanistan as a conclusion to the conflict to seeking a political settlement to end the war. As the years passed and more and more young Soviet men were killed, it became clear that the Soviets were going to have to think even bigger. They were going to have to go beyond regime and strategy changes and rethink their very presence in Afghanistan.

VII

Final Descent

*Politics is not the art of the possible.
It consists in choosing between the disastrous and the unpalatable.*

-John Kenneth Galbraith

As events unfolded in Afghanistan in late 1986 and early 1987, the Soviets began to look for a way out. Both their Afghan allies and their Afghan enemies had frustrated them to the breaking point. They had realized they had walked into a morass that was sucking them dry. They were losing money, lives, military equipment, and international and domestic credibility. It was essentially becoming a vacuum that was violently draining the Soviet military and the country in general. The Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev referred to the conflict as a “bleeding wound” and one that needed to be resolved.¹²²

In 1987, approximately a one-third of Afghanistan’s population, nearly 5 million people, had left the country as refugees to seek asylum in either Pakistan or Iran. Soviet forces were consistently unable to assert control over large swaths of the countryside. They had been unable to seal the porous border between Afghanistan and Pakistan to cut off the mujahideen supply lines and command structure. Demoralizing guerrilla attacks against Soviet forces were continuing on a regular basis and politically there had not been

¹²² United States Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, *Afghanistan: Soviet Occupation and Withdrawal*, Special Report No. 179, December 1988.

much progress made by the Kabul government in asserting its control. They were still not respected by many in the country and were having an intensely difficult time gaining legitimacy in any form. The Najibullah government that took power after May 1986 was experiencing many of the same problems that its predecessor, the Karmal government, had experienced. It was widely unpopular and featured much of the same infighting that had so paralyzed the previous regime.

Although Gorbachev had begun his time as the Soviet leader by turning up the intensity in the Afghan war, he very quickly realized that the Soviets needed to turn down the pressure and get out. During a November 1986 Politburo meeting, the chairman of the KGB, Viktor M. Chebrikov, acknowledged that there was going to be no military solution to the Afghanistan situation and there had to be a settlement reached by political means.¹²³ In another meeting two months later, Soviet Defense Minister Marshal Sergei L. Sokolov echoed Chebrikov's sentiments and added that he believed the military situation on the ground to actually be getting worse.¹²⁴ Without a major increase in manpower, Gorbachev agreed with the assessment that there was no military solution and set about trying to open diplomatic channels to resolve the conflict.

The first, and possibly most important task that Gorbachev had was to secure a favorable situation within which Soviet troops could be withdrawn. If there were no agreements made and all of a sudden Soviet units simply made a beeline for the border, they would be exposed and vulnerable and make excellent target practice for embedded rebel units in the area. In addition to a militarily favorable situation, Gorbachev also

¹²³ Cold War International History Project, *Notes from Politburo Meeting 13 November 1986*, edited by Christian F. Ostermann, (Issue 14/15, Winter 2003-Spring 2004), 143.

¹²⁴ Cold War International History Project, *Notes from Politburo Meeting 21-22 January 1987*, 145.

wanted to make some headway in creating a government in Kabul that would not only maintain some semblance of stability in the country, but that would also continue to be friendly to Moscow. Gorbachev laid out this concern in a December 1987 conversation with Reagan when he said that “We have a more than 2,000km border with them [the Afghans] and therefore we need a friendly neighbor.” He also went on to say that while the Soviets are interested in withdrawing their troops, they need the U.S. to stop supplying arms to the rebels.¹²⁵ This was the condition that Gorbachev was looking to have met before he agrees to have Soviet forces begin to leave the country. During these negotiations, the United States made it clear that it planned to follow a policy of symmetry in regards to aid to the mujahideen. However much aid the Soviets gave to the government in Kabul, the U.S. would match it with aid to the mujahideen. It was a simple tactic, but one that allowed the U.S. to keep their nose in the proceedings and maintain a degree of leverage over the Soviets at the negotiating table. This is a representative example of the types of negotiations that went on between the U.S. and the Soviets.

On February 8, 1988, Gorbachev made a formal announcement that the Soviets planned to withdraw their troops from Afghanistan. They were still in negotiations, however, about the details of the withdrawal. They were engaged in close negotiations with Najibullah and his Kabul government. Gorbachev also engaged other regional powers such as India and discussed the Afghan situation with the Indian defense minister Krishna Chandra Pant in February of 1988. Najibullah met several times with the Soviet leadership in places such as Tashkent, the capital of Soviet Uzbekistan, and in Moscow. In these meetings, Najibullah and Gorbachev discussed the major point of Afghan

¹²⁵ Cold War International History Project, *Conversation between M.S. Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan regarding Afghanistan, 9 December 1987*, 166.

national reconciliation. The Afghan delegation also insisted on the importance of the issue of the “Durand Line,” the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Afghans saw this as a big stumbling block because to uphold the current line would be to divide the traditional land of the Pashtun tribes between the two countries. A British diplomat named Durand drew the line in 1893 to divide the land of the Afghans and the territory of British India. The border had not been officially observed by any previous Afghan government. It was seen as a potentially explosive issue because of the possibility for restiveness in the region spanning the border.¹²⁶ The border was eventually in fact agreed to and in subsequent years the Pashtun region spanning that border has become a vacuum of government control, neither the government of Afghanistan nor the much more powerful government of Pakistan has proven able to wield any authority in that region. This problem was one of many that the Afghan delegation raised in these meetings. It was fairly clear to most onlookers that the Soviet withdrawal would signal the end for the Najibullah government. It makes sense therefore that the Soviets saw Kabul’s constant stream of problems as unnecessary dawdling and Gorbachev called Najibullah out on this in early April 1988. He called him to meet in Tashkent on April 7th and immediately after the meeting they announced that they had come to an agreement and their side was ready to sign the treaty to end the Afghan war.¹²⁷ It had taken a very extended and complex negotiation process but it seemed the Soviets were finally ready to extricate themselves from Afghanistan.

¹²⁶ Cold War International History Project, *Record of a Conversation of M.S. Gorbachev with President of Afghanistan, General Secretary of the CC PDPA Najibullah, Tashkent, 7 April 1988*, 176.

¹²⁷ United States Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, *Afghanistan: Soviet Occupation and Withdrawal*, Special Report No. 179, December 1988.

The whole negotiation process culminated in Geneva, Switzerland on April 14, 1988. With U.N. sponsorship, a treaty was signed between the Afghan and Pakistani governments with the U.S. and Soviet Union also signing as guarantors. The most important facet of the treaty was a timeframe that was laid out for the Soviet withdrawal. Under this treaty, the Soviets would begin their withdrawal on May 15, 1988. By August 15 half their forces will be withdrawn and by February 15 of the following year, all major Soviet combat forces will be out of the country.¹²⁸ For Afghans, the end of Soviet occupation was finally in sight.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

VIII

Endgame

Historical experience is written in blood and iron.

-Mao Tse-Tung

Vladislav Tamarov, a particularly thoughtful Soviet airborne soldier who served in Afghanistan, wrote of his experiences in a book published in 1992. In that book he laments the destruction both of minds and of physical matter that took place in that war. He also, however, was able to sympathize with the Afghans: “Somewhere in our subconscious, we understood that the only thing we wanted was to go home. We also knew that if someone invaded our land, we would defend ourselves, just as these Afghans were doing.” What he did as well was put the Soviets in Afghanistan into a broader historical context. He compared the Soviet outcome in Afghanistan with Napoleon’s doomed invasion of Russia, Hitler’s fateful betrayal of the Soviet Union, and the American experience in Vietnam.¹²⁹ This is very important because the Soviets had taken their place with those other failed expeditions on that infamous mantle. They had fallen prey to the complexities of an indigenous insurgency bound by a steadfast ideology that they could not overcome. Outwardly at least, the resistance was united by a common appeal to a Muslim jihad. It managed to exploit the same common fibers that have traditionally tied Afghan society together. In many ways, Afghanistan represents a river,

¹²⁹ Vladislav Tamarov, *Afghanistan: Soviet Vietnam*, 117.

and periods of oppression and outside intervention have been the tight bends in the stream when the Afghan people, such as water would, come tightly together and unite for a common goal. After the metaphorical bend in the river, or in real terms the oppressor, passes, elements of Afghan society go their separate ways and return to their very individualistic existences. It has traditionally taken an outside invader to bring out a nationally unified Afghanistan.

Although not all Afghans were involved in the war, all felt its effects. Homes, and entire villages had been destroyed. Plots of land that had been farmed for generations were gone, simply blackened craters or scorched messes. It was time for many Afghans to start over again. Many Afghans were coming home for the first time in many years. There were several million of them who had been driven out of the country by the war. An entire generation of Afghans had grown up in the refugee camps of Iran and Pakistan. Thousands of young Afghan boys had received an Islamic education at one of the hundreds of Wahabi or Deobandi madrassahs set up in Pakistan. In these, they had simply learned fanatically orthodox Islam. They had been steeped in it and after the war they were bringing that twisted view of Islam back to Afghanistan.

As radicalized Afghans returned home, so did the Soviet soldiers who took part in the war. The Soviet Union they returned to in 1989 was vastly different than how it had been ten years earlier, when the war began. The Soviet economy was in a free-fall and the Soviet satellite states were becoming openly rebellious. Later that year, Berliners broke out their sledgehammers and pickaxes and tore down the Berlin Wall, removing one of the lasting images of the Eastern Soviet bloc. The Soviets who came home from Afghanistan were not able to fully enjoy a return to normalcy. They returned to a country

wracked by political turmoil and the disintegration of perhaps the greatest, and certainly the most influential, communist state the world has ever known.

As many Afghan refugees returned home and Soviets dealt with the crumbling of their empire, there was also the question of what would become of the foreigners that had come to wage jihad in Afghanistan. The war had brought many outsiders to Afghanistan. Some estimates say that nearly 25,000 Arabs passed through Pakistan and Afghanistan during the years of the war. According to some sources, Arab countries also saw the conflict as a way to ease their penal system. They sent over criminals with the hope that they wouldn't return.¹³⁰ Volunteers from across the Arab world had been blooded in the mountains and valleys of Afghanistan. They had been trained in the ways of war, but now with no more war, were left to look elsewhere for a conflict. Many just left. Osama bin Laden had left as well. He had returned home to Jedda, Saudi Arabia, and was looking to stir up another Islamic jihad, this one against the Marxist rulers of South Yemen.¹³¹ Not all the Arabs left, however, there were a small group of them that stayed behind. They dug in and maintained a relatively muted presence immediately after the war.

The leftover mujahideen groups on the other hand, were not so quiet. Between 1989 and 1991 they had engaged in a multi-sided civil war for ultimate control of Afghanistan. The government forces of Najibullah had held on, to the surprise of many outsiders. The U.S. had withdrawn much of its involvement in the area because the CIA had little doubt that Najibullah's government would fall quickly. They were wrong. They did, however, see the need to maintain some presence to keep the Pakistanis from

¹³⁰ Milt Bearden, "Afghanistan: Graveyard of Empires," *Foreign Affairs*, November-December 2001.

¹³¹ Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 204, 221-222.

installing their own puppet government in Kabul.¹³² It was decided that officially the U.S. would move to back off its covert support and endorse more of a broad, political agenda. All this was window-dressing, however, to the brutal civil war that was ripping Afghanistan apart.

Once united in hatred of the Soviets, the rebel groups had now devolved into a group of angry cobras. Some ties held over from the Soviet war, however. Hekmatyar and his faction remained the darlings of Islamabad. They were tapped by the Pakistanis to ultimately rule over all of Afghanistan. Hekmatyar battled with Massoud, who maintained his power in the north, basing his forces out of the Panjshir Valley. In addition to fighting each other, the militant groups left over from the fighting focused much of their ire on Kabul, where Najibullah, a remnant of the ejected Soviets, was hunkered down.

Within the chaos of post-Soviet Afghanistan, there were three primary groups: Massoud, Hekmatyar, and the government forces of Najibullah. All three had their separate supporters. Massoud found support with elements of the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research. Hekmatyar retained the close support of the Pakistani ISI and thus the CIA, who had kept their lot in with the Pakistanis. It was also rumored around this time that bin Laden still had interests in the region, and more specifically was providing financial contributions to militant Islamic commanders such as

¹³² Ibid., 196.

Hekmatyar.¹³³ Before it collapsed, the Soviet Union maintained contact with Najibullah, its old stooge in Kabul.¹³⁴

On January 1, 1992, the CIA's legal mandate for covert action in Afghanistan expired. The CIA's activities in the region went from gunrunning back to traditional information gathering, better known as spying. There was one covert program that continued, however. That was the program to buy back the Stinger surface-to-air missiles that had been sold to the mujahideen.¹³⁵ While extremely useful in the hands of Afghans to defend against Soviet air attacks, in the wrong hands the missiles could just as easily be turned against "softer" targets such as civilian airliners. Therefore, after the Soviet war ended, the CIA began a program to recover as many of the missile systems as they could. Most were bought back, but there were also many that escaped the CIA dragnet. These missiles make A-list items in any weapons black market. With the CIA largely back to "business as usual," the mujahideen had taken Kabul.

Although a little later than predicted, the Najibullah regime did ultimately fall. It was in April of 1992 that Massoud rode into the city in triumph.¹³⁶ Almost immediately though, he was battling with Hekmatyar's forces for control of the city. As this battle continued back and forth, bands of brigands were terrorizing the countryside. The country was slipping further in anarchy. In about 1994, as if in response to this downward spiral, a movement began in the deep south of the country, centered near the city of Qandahar. Many began to look to this group as the solution to the lawlessness that was tearing

¹³³ Ibid., 225, 231.

¹³⁴ Cold War International History Project, *Record of a Conversation of M.S. Gorbachev with President of Afghanistan Najibullah, 23 August 1990*, 186.

¹³⁵ Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 233.

¹³⁶ Milt Bearden, "Afghanistan: Graveyard of Empires," *Foreign Affairs*, November-December 2001.

Afghanistan apart. Mohammed Omar, a previously little known mullah, gathered his students together and proclaimed a new order in Afghanistan. He called his movement, and those who followed it, “the students” which in Persian translates to *taliban*.

Out of the failed Soviet occupation of Afghanistan came the seedlings that grew into today’s Islamic terror network. Although by no means the only source of Islamic terrorism, the Soviet-Afghan war created the largely failed state of Afghanistan within which the terrorists grew, trained, and prepared for a global war.

The Soviet experience was characterized by several factors: the difficulty of a preeminent military superpower to pacify a highly underdeveloped and backwards society, a lack of understanding of important ethnic groups and divisions and the inability to work along these lines, distrust of the indigenous population, and being labeled with the black mark of a “foreign invader,” which has spelled defeat in Afghanistan for nearly every previous wearer. Ironically, these are all similar difficulties that the U.S. and coalition forces are encountering in Afghanistan in 2008. While study of the Soviet war does not offer clear answers to all problems, it does lay out what has not worked in the past.

In a effort to avoid past mistakes and the crippling outcome the Soviets endured, a thorough study of the past would offer perspective for American and coalition planners going forward. In addition to studying the history, the only group that will have any success in the country is one that has a firm handle on the ethnic groups and tribal distinctions that define the country. Any attempt that is ignorant to those things will fail. As the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan is filed away in history alongside

other fateful debacles such as Napoleon's invasion of Russia, Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union, and the American disaster in Vietnam, those involved with U.S. and coalition planning in Afghanistan would be well-advised to brush up on their recent history, if they want to avoid the same fate as those other doomed expeditions.

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