On December 25, 1979, Soviet troops entered the territory of the socialist republic of Afghanistan at the invitation of the present government. Its leader, Hafizullah Amin, who had taken power by executing his predecessor, Nur Mohammad Taraki, was now himself executed by Babrak Karmal, a new Soviet-installed leader flown in directly from the Soviet Union. In retrospect, it was not a wise decision. Taraki had taken power in April 1978, when army officers had ousted a non-aligned government that had itself ousted the monarchy in 1975. Headed by Taraki, this regime was friendly to the Soviet Union, and pursued secularist reforms similar to those once implemented in Soviet Central Asia, including secular education, equal rights for women, land reforms, and other administrative reforms. Internal frictions led to Taraki’s ouster soon after he had won the support of Leonid Brezhnev, leaving the Soviet leader feeling betrayed. The invasion, or "exertion of fraternal aid" in classic Soviet parlance, was a chance to square accounts. Though justified by the terms of the 1978 Treaty of Friendship between the two countries, and undertaken "in defense of the gains of the revolution," the invasion did not account for underlying causes.

Characteristic of foreign policy decisions in the late Brezhnev-era were the small circle of advisors consulted, the overly personal approach taken by Brezhnev and his closest associates, and the reliance on raw power over nuanced understanding. Though firmly in power by dint of armed superiority and Soviet support, the Afghan Communist Party was riddled with factions and had little support from the population. Islamic resistance first aroused by the Taraki reforms was organized and capable of small-scale armed resistance by the time of the invasion. Although unable to engage Soviet troops in open battle, resistance fighters who called themselves
mujahideen used the mountainous terrain to their advantage in guerrilla warfare. Soon they united inside Afghanistan and across the Pakistani border in Peshawar to resist the invaders and the Soviet-backed Afghan Army. The “temporary” conflict would continue for ten years, ending in Soviet withdrawal.

The war, fueled by and source of Cold War anxieties, operated on the law of unintended consequences. Plans for a minor palace coup did not consider the possibility of a long-term war between peoples. The Soviet government was forced to increase the size of its armed forces and to draft more young man into the line of fire. Tens of thousands of them returned home in body bags or disfigured by modern weaponry. The war provided a divisive issue right when the dissident movement was at its peak, and diverted funding from the stagnant civilian economy as it ground to a halt. It destroyed the already ailing relationship with the western nations, and undermined Soviet relations with the Third World. Following the bizarre logic of the Cold War, in which the enemy of my enemy is my friend, it caused the United States, recently rocked by the Islamic revolution in Iran, to become an ardent supporter and arms supplying to the Islamic revolt in Afghanistan.

Subject essay: James von Geldern


Recently Western, and especially American, mass news media have been disseminating deliberately planted rumors about some sort of interference by the Soviet Union in the internal affairs of Afghanistan. They have gone so far as to claim that Soviet military units have been moved into Afghan territory.

It is common knowledge that relations between the Soviet Union and Afghanistan are based on a firm foundation of good neighborliness, non-interference in each other’s internal affairs and equal, mutually advantageous cooperation. These relations have become considerably stronger since the April [1978] revolution, when power in Afghanistan shifted to the hands of the people, who have begun the construction of a new life.
The Soviet Union believed that imperialist forces... convinced of the irreversibility of the changes that have taken place in Afghanistan, would not go beyond a certain limit, would show consideration for realities. At the same time, our country made no secret that it will not allow Afghanistan being turned into a bridgehead for preparation of imperialist aggression against the Soviet Union.

But enemies of People’s Afghanistan did not stop armed struggle against it. Imperialist interference started assuming forms and proportions still broader and more dangerous for the Afghan people. External imperialist reaction has been making continuous efforts also for... disorganizing the ranks of the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan.

Reaction found a helper for implementation of its anti-popular designs among the very leadership of Democratic Afghanistan. H. Amin turned out to be that helper. By deception and intrigues he got hold of the main levers of management of the state and then overthrew the lawful president N. Taraki and killed him. By his criminal actions, gross violation of law and order, by cruelty and abuse of power, Amin was undermining the ideals of the April Revolution. On his hands is the blood of many representatives of the industrious Afghan people, party leaders, honored military men, Moslem dignitaries and other honest citizens. Amin in actual fact teamed with the enemies of the April Revolution.

In conditions when interference from outside and terror unleashed by Amin within the country created a real threat to the democratic system, there were patriotic forces in Afghanistan which rose not only against foreign aggression but also against the usurper. Relying on the support of the people, they removed Amin. Revolutionary law and order was restored in the country. The People’s Democratic Party and the state are directing their efforts to protect the gains of the April revolution, sovereignty, independence and national dignity of Afghanistan.

The Afghan Government has made again an insistent request that the Soviet Union should give immediate aid and support in the struggle against external aggression.

The Soviet Union decided to grant this request and to send to Afghanistan a limited Soviet military contingent that will be used exclusively for assistance in rebuffing the armed interference from the outside. The Soviet contingent will be completely pulled out of Afghanistan when the reason that necessitated such an action exists no longer.

Making this decision, the Soviet Union proceeded from the community of the interests of Afghanistan and our country in the questions of security recorded in the 1978 Treaty of Friendship, Good-neighborliness and Cooperation, out of the interest of preserving peace in the region.
Notes on source material

Recently declassified documents from archives in the former Soviet Union and memoirs of senior Soviet military and political leaders present the complex and tragic story of the ten years of the Soviet military involvement in Afghanistan. Most observers agree that the last war of the Soviet Union created or aggravated the internal dynamics that eventually culminated in the dissolution of the country itself. The documents shed light on the most important moments in the history of the Soviet war in Afghanistan—the Afghan government’s requests for assistance, the Soviet Union’s initial refusal of troops, the reversal of this policy by a small group of the Politburo and the Soviet decision to invade; the expansion of the initial mission to include combat operations against the Afghan resistance; early criticism of the Soviet policy and of the People’s Democratic party of Afghanistan (PDPA) regime; and the decision to withdraw the troops. Taken together, these materials suggest some lessons that might be drawn from the Soviet experience of fighting a war in Afghanistan.

The decision to send troops was made after a long deliberation and repeated requests from the leadership of the PDPA, Prime Minister Hafizullah Amin and President Nur Mohammad Taraki. The Politburo discussions show that the Soviet leaders were very reluctant to send troops, and responded to the Afghan requests with shipments of military equipment, but not troops, throughout the spring and summer of 1979. However, the overthrow of Taraki by Amin in September just after Taraki’s return from Moscow heightened Soviet paranoia about the possibility that Amin would become another Sadat and turn towards the U.S. The actual decision to invade was made in secret by a very small group of Politburo members, against the strong and openly expressed opposition of the military, and only then rubber-stamped by the other Politburo members. Both Chief of USSR General Staff Marshal Ogarkov and his Deputy General of the Army Akhromeev voiced strong objections to introducing troops on the grounds that the proposed limited contingent of forces would not be able to fulfill its objectives.

The decision to send troops was made on the basis of limited information. According to Soviet veterans of the events, KGB sources were trusted over the military intelligence (GRU) sources. This partly reflected the growing influence of the KGB Chairman Yu. V. Andropov, who controlled the flow of information to General Secretary Brezhnev, who was partially
incapacitated and ill for most of 1979. KGB reports from Afghanistan created a picture of urgency and strongly emphasized the possibility of Amin’s links to the CIA and U.S. subversive activities in the region. (President Carter had already signed a secret “finding” in July 1979 authorizing covert aid to the Afghani opponents of the Taraki-Amin regime.)

Afghanistan did not fit into the mental maps and ideological constructs of the Soviet leaders. Their analysis of internal social processes in Afghanistan was done through the conceptual lens of Marxist-Leninist doctrine, which blinded the leadership to the realities of traditional tribal society. Believing that there was no single country in the world, which was not ripe for socialism, party ideologues like Mikhail Suslov and Boris Ponomarev saw Afghanistan as a “second Mongolia.” Such conceptualization of the situation led to the attempts to impose alien social and economic practices on Afghan society, such as the forced land reform.

The Soviet decision makers did not anticipate the influential role of Islam in the Afghan society. There were very few experts on Islam in the Soviet government and the academic institutions. The highest leadership was poorly informed about the strength of religious beliefs among the masses of the Afghan population. Political and military leaders were surprised to find that rather than being perceived as a progressive anti-imperialist force, the Afghans as foreign invaders, and “infidels.” Reports from Afghanistan show the growing awareness of the “Islamic factor” on the part of Soviet military and political personnel. The Afghan communist PDPA never was a unified party; it was split along ethnic and tribal lines. The infighting between the “Khalq” and the “Parcham” factions made the tasks of controlling the situation much more challenging for Moscow notwithstanding the great number of Soviet advisors at every level of the party and state apparatus. The Soviet underestimation of ethnic tensions within Afghan society was one of the reasons of the unsuccessful policy of national reconciliation.

The war in Afghanistan had a major impact on domestic politics in the Soviet Union. It was one of the key factors in the delegitimization of Communist Party rule. Civil society reacted to the intervention by marginalizing the Afghan veterans. The army was demoralized as a result of being perceived as an invader. The prominent dissident and human rights activist, Academician Andrei Sakharov, publicly denounced the atrocities committed by the Soviet Army in Afghanistan. The image of the Soviet Army fighting against Islam in Afghanistan also contributed to a rapid rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the Central Asian republics and possibly to the strengthening of the independence movement in Chechnya, both of which continue to pose major security threats to Russia today.

The Soviet Army also quickly realized the inadequacy of its preparation and planning for the mission in Afghanistan. The initial mission—to guard cities and
installations—was soon expanded to combat, and kept growing over time. The Soviet reservists, who comprised the majority of the troops initially sent in, were pulled into full-scale combat operations against the rebels, while the regular Afghan army was often unreliable because of the desertions and lack of discipline.

The Soviet troops had absolutely no anti-guerrilla training. While the formal mission of the troops was to protect the civilians from the anti-government forces, in reality, Soviet soldiers often found themselves fighting against the civilians they intended to protect, which sometimes led to indiscriminate killing of local people. Operations to pursue and capture rebel formations were often unsuccessful and had to be repeated several times in the same area because the rebels retreated to the mountains and returned to their home villages as soon as the Soviet forces returned to their garrisons. Soviet traditional weaponry and military equipment, especially armored cars and tanks were extremely vulnerable on Afghan terrain.

The Soviet troops also suffered from the confusion about their goals—the initial official mission was to protect the PDPA regime; however, when the troops reached Kabul, their orders were to overthrow Amin and his regime. Then the mission was changed once again, but the leadership was not willing to admit that the Soviet troops were essentially fighting the Afghan civil war for the PDPA. The notion of the “internationalist duty” that the Soviet Limited Contingent was fulfilling in Afghanistan was essentially ideological, based on the idea that Soviet troops were protecting the socialist revolution in Afghanistan whereas the experience on the ground immediately undermined such justifications.

The realization that there could be no military solution to the conflict in Afghanistan came to the Soviet military leadership very early on. The issue of troop withdrawal and the search for a political solution was discussed as early as 1980, but no real steps in that direction were taken, and the Limited Contingent continued to fight in Afghanistan without a clearly defined objective.

Early military reports emphasized the difficulty of fighting on the mountainous terrain, for which the Soviet Army had no training whatsoever. Parallels with the American War in Vietnam were obvious and frequently referred to by the Soviet military officers.

“Pravda” Correspondent I. Shchedrov’s letter to the CC CPSU on the Situation in Afghanistan
November 12, 1981

According to the conference of party advisors, as of October 1981, the government of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan controlled 5 thousand hamlets out of the total number of 35 thousand, i.e. less than 15%, as well as the majority of district centers, and all 29 cities in the provinces. Overall, in this respect, there have been no significant changes in the situation from the summer of the last year.

So far, not one province has been fully liberated. In the rural areas, controlled by the rebels there is not a single guerilla unit to be found, not one big active underground group of the PDPA, DOMA or of any other revolutionary organization of the DRA.

The big operations aimed at destroying the bands and the rebel strongholds in the rear of the counter-revolution, which are undertaken in the situation where 85% of the hamlets still remain under the control of the rebels, do not have much of an effect. Upon completing such an
operation, the Afghan-Soviet troops as a rule return to their bases and the regions fall back under the control of the rebels. The practice of leaving [groups] of people’s regime in some isolated settlements without a permanent cover by the military forces does not change the situation. In addition, the tactics of hot pursuit of the rebels and that of destruction of rebels’ nests on their own territory is facing growing criticism on the part of the local population. In the course of those operations, the housing and the agricultural fields are often destroyed, the civilian population is killed, and in the end everything remains the same. The rebels return and control the territory again. The experience of the last year has shown that there was no significant increase in the territory controlled by the DRA after such operations, and it is not happening now. Moreover, in the majority of the provinces, peasant visitors from the regions controlled by the rebels come secretly to the provincial centers with requests to help them in creating units of defense of the revolution and of the popular regime. The experience of Farah and other provinces has already produced positive results.

There are some examples of the opposite. In Kunduze, Shindand, and in a number of other locations, where huge overpopulated military bases of Soviet troops and Afghan units are concentrated on territories surrounded by barbed wire, units that are following the already traditional tactics of hot pursuit of the rebels on the large territories, the facts are such that a kilometer or two away from those lie the areas, which are totally controlled by the rebels, and when the night falls, and sometimes even in the daytime, they hear the sounds of nearby fighting. One of the blocks of Kabul—Podman—still remains under the control of the rebels.

The war in Afghanistan is really a special case, an undeclared war with massive participation of forces of international reaction from the abroad. But at the same time, it is also a civil war, where the counter-revolution has now switched to the new protracted tactics, where there are no big military units openly fighting against the Afghan-Soviet troops anymore, even though the general number of forces of the band formations remains the same. And the counter-revolution masks itself as if they were civilians, they live among the people. The rebels actively use not only terror, but also propaganda, controlling extensive areas and relying on the old age-proven relations of the tribal and feudal society.

Purely military operations aimed at destruction of a certain rebel unit, or a certain stronghold obviously bring no results in the situation where the enemy controls the extensive territory.

It is quite clear now that even under the most favorable circumstances, and with the most effective strategy and the tactics, the defeat of the counter-revolutionary formations will take years, most likely no less than five years. This opinion is shared by B. Karmal, S. A. Ketmand, and by the majority of other leaders of the central as well as the provincial structures, and by our advisors.

Translated by Svetlana Savranskaya, The National Security Archive.
The “Afghans”

The analogy between the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the undeclared American war in Vietnam was impossible to ignore by the mid 1980s. Fighting against a hostile cold war ideology, the Soviets found themselves resented by their allies no less than their friends, and defending a rotting economic aid to a region to prosecute the brutal campaign to Soviet readers, we West and of how a cohesive social group, the people who are their duty, as it is expected from the domestication on how to act when armed. The 40th decorated with the sign “King’s and the perspectives of regulating the conflict.
The Afghanistan war through the eyes of the historian

Q: Iurii Vladimirovich, before everything else, in your opinion, why did the Soviet Union become so deeply involved in the Afghanistan situation?

A: We can not be unconcerned with the fate of Afghanistan. We share with them a common border of about 2,400 kilometers. Ever since 1919, we provided Afghanistan with extensive aid. For example, by 1978 we took the first place among nations in providing the economic aid to Afghanistan. Over three thousand Afghani officers have gone through basic training in our country even before the April revolution of 1978. All of this can not be erased from history.

Q: I agree. But it is one thing to work together with the neighbor in different fields, including the military, but it is totally different to send your troops in to support him. In the last ten years, you have been in Afghanistan on many occasions. You participated in the conventions dealing with developing the new politics in that country. Please explain what made our leadership step over the fateful border in 1979?

A: It is not an easy question. It is known that at that time, there was a high-level committee dealing with Afghanistan. It had to give a recommendation on how to act when armed troops of extremist right groups infiltrate the territory of the neighboring country with which we have an alliance pact. I must say that following the April revolution the Pakistani influence started to increase, though it can not in essence be compared to that of the present time.

We could have used political and diplomatic means. I am convinced that they were not fully exhausted. Unfortunately a different policy prevailed. Do you remember that the cannons of Louis XIV were decorated with the sign "King’s last argument"? That was the "argument" they turned to. Not taking into account the particularities of Afghanistan, they were planning to stabilize the situation and to bring the soldiers home. It turned out to be quite different. The 40th Army was there for nine years and seven weeks. This is the longest war that Russia has been involved in since 1813.

V. Skosyrev, A Lesson Which Should Be Learned. May 4, 1989


For almost ten years, Afghanistan, for us, has been a wound that would not heal. But let us be honest with ourselves. Though the Soviet soldiers, sent over the Amu-Darya, selflessly carried out their duty, as it is expected from the loyal sons of their Homeland, our involvement in Afghanistan caused a lot of doubts at home. Our people did not accept this war. The proof of that is the letters sent to the editor, whose authors ask for the explanation of how the Soviet Army was sent beyond the borders without the sanctions of the Supreme Council, and without any attempt whatsoever to find out the opinions of the majority, beforehand. The readers are also interested in the present situation in Afghanistan and the perspectives of regulating the conflict.

Learned. May 4, 1989