



12 MODERN HISTORY

Semester IV

Afghanistan

The Last Act of Soviet "Imperialism"

***HYPOTHESIS:** The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics' primary motive for invading Afghanistan in 1979 was to attempt to bring order to a country that, for many years, had been suffering from administrative and political instability.*

In February 1989, after almost ten years of fighting a bitter civil war, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics withdrew its forces from neighbouring Afghanistan. It had invested itself in the nation on such a scale that its actions were considered by most of the Western world as imperialistic. However, it can be seen that the USSR's primary motive for invading Afghanistan was to attempt to bring order to a country that, for many years, had been suffering from administrative and political instability.

Afghanistan is a small country in central Asia less than one-tenth the size of Australia, with a population slightly larger than ours. Peasant farmers, with a small percentage of nomadic herdsman, make up the bulk of the Afghan population. The mountainous ranges of the country have tended to divide society into isolated tribal groups, making centralised government of the country almost impossible to effectively implement and maintain.

In the early twentieth century, Britain attempted to implement and exercise some control over Afghanistan's disorganised affairs with a British "sphere-of-influence". Yet, due to problems with the country's segmented society and difficulties being faced at home with World War I, Britain was forced to reduce its influence, culminating in the granting of complete independence in 1947. Afghanistan, in the years following, attempted to pursue a policy of neutrality and independence, but soon found itself in desperate need of administrative assistance and economic aid.

As the United States of America was, at this time, attempting to contain the boundaries of the USSR with imperialistic tactics, the Soviet Union was searching for a means of counter-balancing the American influence in the region. In addition, the USSR noted the intense hardship being faced by Afghanistan with regards to its government and administration, and witnessed the failure of the United States in supporting the country. Therefore, in 1955, the Soviet Union commenced a generous aid program, assuring the Afghan government that "... its neutrality stance was totally acceptable"¹. However, while the economic assistance was of great benefit to Afghanistan, it did not aid in bringing about order to the internal instability the country was suffering from.

During the 1960s, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics offered a Marxist solution to Afghanistan's problems by supporting the formation of a communist party, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). By 1973, the PDPA had sufficient power to overthrow the ruling monarch and establish a republic under the leadership of President Daoud. Only adding to the internal chaos of Afghanistan's administration however, "Daoud played off one faction of the PDPA against the other ..." ² - simply more problems for Afghanistan.

¹ *Senior Modern History 4*. (1986). Brisbane: School of Distance Education, 29

² *Senior Modern History 4*. op. cit., 30

The Soviets hence felt committed to intervening in the dispute, resulting in yet another coup in 1978 and the installation of a new government headed by the Khalq faction of the PDPA.

The Soviet Union however, in all its attempts to bring order to Afghanistan's instability, was "... seen as a totally godless nation"³, as the "wobbly"⁴ Khalq government became immensely unpopular and was viewed as a repressive regime by the traditional Islamic rulers of the agricultural population. So opposed to the new central government were they that the rural leaders united under a common name, the Mujahideen, and began rioting in Afghanistan's major centres. "This event ... lead the Soviet General Staff to start intervention planning"⁵; the USSR believed that, in order to stabilise the country at such a critical time, outright intervention would be the only solution to Afghanistan's internal crisis, and saw it as "... quite legitimate to respond to a call from an adjoining allied communist country for assistance in restoring law and order"⁶. Hence, on 27 December, 1979, "The Soviet Politburo moved to stabilize [sic] the situation"⁷ and the invasion of Afghanistan began.

The West, especially the United States, saw the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan only "... in terms of naked aggression; a blatant bid to extend the power of the USSR in an area already in a chaotic state ..."⁸. Yet, "The Soviet Union had significant experience with stability operations ..."⁹ and protested its "... desire for peaceful co-existence and détente"¹⁰. Leonid Brezhnev, the Soviet leader who sanctioned the invasion, states that, "We knew that the decision to bring in troops would not be popular in the modern world, even if it was absolutely legal. But we also knew that we would have ceased to be a great power if we refrained from carrying the burden of taking unpopular but necessary decisions, extraordinary decisions prompted by extraordinary circumstances."¹¹

Therefore, "When all this is applied to the situation in Afghanistan in 1979 it can be understood why ... It was worth attempting a quick-fix military solution to the complex problems of Afghan political unrest. After all, this tactic had worked in Eastern Europe for 30 years. There was much to be gained by trying it, and much to be lost by inaction."¹²

Yet, Afghanistan, like it had done for almost century, refused to change or conform to outside intervention in its administration and government. Like the USA-Vietnam War, the Soviet Union could not influence nor win over the people to support a system of centralised government. Rather, the people followed their traditional Islamic Mujahideen leaders and rebelled against the USSR's attempts to stabilise the nation. Hence, fifteen thousand Soviet soldiers died and over four million Afghans were either killed or forced into refugee camps while the Soviet Union tried desperately for nearly a decade to bring some form of stability to a country facing internal ruin.

The Soviet Union, seeing no solution to Afghanistan's problems after many years of trying to stabilise the country's administration, removed the last of its troops in February 1989. Most of the Western world, without much understanding of the internal disorder in Afghanistan, condemned the USSR for its latest act of "aggressive imperialism". However, the Soviet Union had invaded Afghanistan primarily as a means of bringing order to a country that, for many years, had been suffering from administrative and political instability. It failed.

³ *Senior Modern History 4*. op. cit., 30

⁴ Nawroz, M.Y. et. al. *The Soviet War in Afghanistan: History and Harbinger of Future War?* (1995). (internet).
gopher://cc1.kuleuven.ac.be:71/00/lsvarch/isn/LOG9505/isn.LOG9505.E.2189

⁵ Nawroz, M.Y. et. al.

⁶ *Senior Modern History 4*. op. cit., 32

⁷ Nawroz, M.Y. et. al.

⁸ *Senior Modern History 4*. op. cit., 31

⁹ Nawroz, M.Y. et. al.

¹⁰ *Senior Modern History 4*. op. cit., 31

¹¹ Brezhnev, *Senior Modern History 4*. op. cit., 32.

¹² *Senior Modern History 4*. op. cit., 33

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aikman, D. (1995). "Soviet Union: 48 hours of Chaos". *Time Almanac 1990s* (CD-ROM). New York: Grolier Inc.
- Beyer, L. (1995). "They Also Made History". *Time Almanac 1990s* (CD-ROM). New York: Grolier Inc.
- Nawroz, M.Y. et. al. (1995). *The Soviet War in Afghanistan: History and Harbinger of Future War?* (internet).
gopher://cc1.kuleuven.ac.be:71/00/lsvarch/isn/LOG9505/isn.LOG9505.E.2189
- Senior Modern History 4.* (1986). Brisbane: School of Distance Education.
- Smolowe, J. (1995). "Soviet Union: Paranoia Run Amuck". *Time Almanac 1990s* (CD-ROM). New York: Grolier Inc.