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The main causes of the Soviet Union attack in Afghanistan

The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan was a costly and, ultimately, pointless war. Historical hindsight has made this evident. However, exactly why the Red Army wound up in direct military conflict, embroiled in a bitter and complicated civil war – some 3,000 kilometres away from Moscow – is a point of historiographical uncertainty. The evidence available suggests that geopolitical calculations were at the top of the Kremlin's goals. These were arguably to deter US interference in the USSR's 'back-yard', to gain a highly strategic foothold in Southwest Asia and, not least of all, to attempt to contain the radical Islamic revolution emanating from Iran. The subsidiary goal of the invasion was to secure an ideologically-friendly régime in the region. The Soviet-Afghan War was one of the turning points of the late Cold War.

Key words: the USSR, Afghanistan, civil war, regime, invasion.

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Ауғанстанның Кеңес әскерлерінің шапқыншылығы негізгі себептері

Кеңес Одағының Ауғанстанға басып кіруі қымбатқа түсті, соның нәтижесінде мағынасыз соғысқа ұласты. Бұл уақыт өте келе анық болды. Қызыл Әскер тікелей әскери қақтығыстарға түсті, Мәскеуден 3000 шақырым жерде өткен қиян-кескі және күрделі азаматтық соғысқа араласты. Қолда бар мәліметтерге қарасақ, Кремль үшін геосаяси мақсат ең өзекті басымдық болды. Бұл өз кезегінде АҚШ-тың КСРО «артқы алаңына» килігуін тоқтатуды, сонымен қатар, Оңтүстік-Батыс Азиядағы жоғары стратегиялық тірек нүктесіне қол жеткізуді және Ираннан төніп тұрған радикалды исламдық революцияны тежеуді көздеді. Ал басып кірудің қосалқы мақсаты – осы аймақта идеялық-достық тәртібін қалыптастыру. Сондай-ақ, Политбюроның тағдыршешті қаулысын ойластырған Брежнев емес, Кеңес Одағының жоғары беделді тұлғаларынан құралған кіріптарлық топтың ісі. Осы уақытқа дейін оның маңыздылығына тиісті баға берілген жоқ, бірақ кеңес-ауған соғысы Қырғи-қабақ соғыстың негізгі бетбұрысты нүктесі болды.

Түйін сөздер: КСРО, Ауғанстан, Азаматтық соғыс, тәртіп, басып кіру.

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Основные причины вторжения СССР в Афганистан

Советское вторжение в Афганистан было дорогостоящей и, в конечном счете, бессмысленной войной. Это стало очевидно позднее. Красная Армия попала в прямой военный конфликт, была втянута в ожесточенную и сложную гражданскую войну, которая проходила около 3000 км от Москвы. Имеющиеся данные показывают, что геополитические расчеты были самыми приоритетными целями для Кремля. Они были направлены на то, чтобы удержать вмешательства США в «задний двор» СССР, а также, чтобы получить высокую стратегическую точку опоры в Юго-Западной Азии и, не в последнюю очередь, чтобы попытаться сдержать радикальную исламскую революцию, исходящую от Ирана. Дочерняя цель вторжения заключалась в обеспечении идейно-дружественного режима в регионе. Кроме того, судьбоносное решение Политбюро было задумано не Брежневым, а небольшой каббалистической группой наиболее влиятельных фигур Советского Союза. До сих пор недооценена ее значимость, но советско-афганская война была одной из поворотных точек в конце холодной войны.

Ключевые слова: СССР, Афганистан, гражданская война, режим, вторжение.

**THE MAIN CAUSES
OF THE SOVIET
UNION ATTACK IN
AFGHANISTAN**

*«Strength, and not a little strength at that,
is needed to defend socialist gains.» [1]
Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev*

The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan was a costly and, ultimately, pointless war. Historical hindsight has made this evident. However, exactly why the Red Army wound up in direct military conflict, embroiled in a bitter and complicated civil war – some 3,000 kilometres away from Moscow – is a point of historiographical uncertainty. The evidence available suggests that geopolitical calculations were at the top of the Kremlin's goals. These were arguably to deter US interference in the USSR's 'backyard', to gain a highly strategic foothold in Southwest Asia and, not least of all, to attempt to contain the radical Islamic revolution emanating from Iran. The subsidiary goal of the invasion was to secure an ideologically-friendly régime in the region. Furthermore, the fateful Politburo decision was not conceived by Brezhnev, but by a small, cabalistic group of the Soviet Union's most powerful figures. Little known and appreciated for its significance, the Soviet-Afghan War was one of the turning points of the late Cold War. On the evening of the 27th of December 1979, the Afghan government was effectively decapitated. During Operation Storm, a seven hundred-strong unit of Soviet special forces infiltrated the city of Kabul. They were disguised as regular Afghan soldiers, and had come to fulfil one objective: killing Prime Minister Hafizullah Amin [2].

Two days earlier, the Fortieth Army had moved in thousands of armed personnel and vehicles from the Soviet border town of Termez. Within several weeks, all of the country's cities and major roads were under the Soviet occupation. Upon receiving intelligence reports to this effect, Jimmy Carter's National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, wrote to the President: «We now have the opportunity of giving to the USSR its Vietnam War. Indeed,» he could add retrospectively, «for almost ten years, Moscow had to carry on a war...that brought about the demoralisation and finally the break-up of the Soviet empire.» The most basic, yet contentious question is that of why the army was brought in, to begin with. Following the 1970s period of détente between the United States (US) and the Soviet Union, the latter seemed to be in an advantageous

strategic position, compared to the post-Vietnam paralysis which plagued its main opponent. Scott McMichael, a military historian, argued that this «turned out largely to be an illusion,» although there is a substance to the claim that the Soviet Union was ahead of the game in the lead up to 1979. This is exemplified by Moscow's increasing assertiveness in foreign affairs during this period. As a direct result of the so-called 'Brezhnev doctrine', the USSR asserted its «right and duty» to go to war in foreign countries «if and when an existing socialist regime was threatened.» This accounts for the increased overseas military, political, and economic support being given at this time to pro-Marxist régimes in Nicaragua, Angola, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Yemen, etc. Such expeditions were in line with the twin geopolitical objectives of the Soviet Union. The first Soviet policy consisted of preparing the Red Army for a potential conventional and, probably, nuclear confrontation with the US. Secondly, Moscow pledged to continue supporting «wars of national liberation» abroad [3]. The latter resulted in what some analysts cleverly called the Third World War. It would be decisively challenged in the deserts and mountains of Afghanistan. The Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan was primarily motivated by geopolitical interests in the region. Another obvious factor in the decision was related to the soft power commitments of socialist ideology, which predisposed the Soviet Union to safeguard a friendly régime. After all, in the zero-sum game between both Cold War superpowers, one ally lost almost certainly meant an enemy gained. At this stage, however, a key historiographical problem arises. This is namely the profound difficulty of disentangling the two motives. Was *raison d'état* or ideology a more important factor in shaping the thinking of Soviet strategists in the late Cold War? It does not help that the Politburo was inherently secretive and opaque, leaving behind very few reliable records of the group's conversations. In practice, however, both motives were inextricably mixed. Soviet foreign policy, as Stalin had designed it, embodied this ambiguous approach. Explained Ronald Suny: «In a circular way ideology was subordinated to state interests, but interests were understood in terms of ideology.» It is imperative to note that the Soviet Union was ideologically-bound to the socialist régime in Kabul. At their core, the Politburo's aims were primarily statist. But the Soviets acted as self-interested international players, concerned with advancing the USSR's own position in the Cold War contest. The People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) was a Soviet-backed

Marxist group. They had come to power through a putsch in April 1978 [4].

Directly after their 'April Revolution' it became clear that the communist and, hence, atheistic island of Kabul – surrounded by an overwhelmingly Muslim ocean – would need Moscow's support in order to survive. President Nur Mohammad Taraki understood this crucial fact. He made numerous desperate demands for his benefactors to send in direct military support to Afghanistan – up to six times in one recorded dialogue. The conservative Islamic rebels, named Mujahideen (soldiers of God), increasingly threatened Taraki's besieged government. For quite some time, the Soviet leadership was unwilling to commit itself to sending any more than token military advisors and some weapons to Afghanistan. This was probably due to Brezhnev's much reiterated fear of nuclear escalation with the US, at a time when the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty II (SALT II) had just been concluded. However, *détente* was by then moribund in all but name. Soviet assertiveness throughout the Third World was partly to blame, but Afghanistan was the last nail in the coffin. The further deterioration of Afghanistan's situation in early 1979 moved Moscow's leadership out of its inertia, and directly into a trap. For example, some twenty Soviet military advisers (out of 1,500 in the country) were publicly lynched and mutilated by angry mobs in the city of Herat. From then on, the attempt to create an Afghan satellite state was justified in Marxist-Leninist terms of the Soviet Union's 'internationalist duty' towards friendly neighbours. In a telephone conversation to Taraki, Soviet Premier Aleksei Kosygin soothed his besieged counterpart thus: «We are comrades and are waging a common struggle and that is why we should not stand on ceremony with each other. Everything must be subordinate to this [relationship]» [5]. The Soviet Union's 1978 'Treaty of Cooperation and Good-Neighbourliness' with Afghanistan served as the official pretext to intervene militarily in that country. Behind the comradely rhetoric, though, were the obvious strategic benefits of the deployment. First of all, the Soviet drive into the heart of Southwest Asia coincided with an age-long, imperial Russian longing for a warm-water port. Of course, acquiring such a facility would have required further expansion – potentially through Iran to the Persian Gulf, or into Pakistan – but this can only remain conjecture. The timing of the invasion of Afghanistan is also suspect. The fact that it came almost exactly one year after the 1978 Iranian revolution, which brought to power a government equally hostile to

US as to Soviet interests, strongly suggests that the Politburo's decision was based on a gamble of power politics. Moscow argued that it was pre-empting a possible 'imperialist' move in the region. This is certainly evidenced in the political education which Red Army units received prior to entering Afghan territory. When the airborne trooper, Yuri Tinkov, was ordered to hastily prepare for combat, he quite tellingly assumed that their destination would be Iran. Instead, he received the following mission briefing: Our borders are threatened. The American Green Berets intend to conquer Afghanistan... [and] set up their missiles. We don't have the military capacity that would enable us to repel an attack directed from the south... It's possible that they will start shooting at us while we're still in the air – that is, if the Americans notice us [6].

In his 1993 memoirs, ex-Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) Robert Gates revealed that direct CIA involvement in Afghanistan had commenced almost six months before the Soviet invasion. Jimmy Carter signed a presidential decree in July 1979 to covertly aid the Mujahideen insurgents. A memo for the President's eyes only later warned him of the probability that «expansion of its influence over Iran will rank at or near the top of the Kremlin's hierarchy of regional priorities.» These material and financial contributions from the US effectively propped up the guerrillas throughout their ten year war against the Red Army. However the argument of an imminent full-scale American invasion of Afghanistan was clearly a propagandistic exaggeration. What is important to bear in mind, though, is that many contemporaneous Soviet leaders, soldiers and citizens actually perceived a credible threat to the USSR's long-term interests on its southern borders. Moscow's fear of Chinese involvement was also not unfounded. The CIA-directed program for supporting the 'soldiers of God' would eventually attract financial and advisory aid from such strange-bedfellows as China, France, Great Britain, Iran, Pakistan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and, astonishingly, even the state of Israel. A common enemy was the only thing that they shared. Although not officially admitted, another, and potentially more potent, threat to the Soviet Union's integrity was also targeted in Afghanistan. This was the threat of radical Islam tearing apart the USSR. During the Cold War years, the Soviet Union hosted the fifth largest Muslim population in the world [7]. It is clear, then, that the holy Afghan jihad against communism presented a considerable challenge to the Soviet state's very territorial integrity. The Islamists were actively sponsored by revolutionary

government of Iran, and that of Pakistan. Moreover, Islamic peoples worldwide protested the infidel's bloody venture into Afghanistan, a trend which the KGB attempted to contain in and outside the Soviet Union. According to the Mitrokhin Archives, Moscow's paranoia was evident in the Soviet secret service's fanciful linking of Iran's revolutionary brand of Islam, to CIA efforts to destabilise the predominantly Muslim Soviet Socialist Republics (SSR's) of Central Asia. Nevertheless, it is a fact that a considerable segment of the Soviet Union's population «looked far more to Mecca than to Moscow.» In the frantic international diplomacy which took place in the months before the Soviet invasion, the East German Ambassador to Kabul assessed the precarious situation. Avoiding a war in Afghanistan would not only require protecting Soviet influence and the Afghan communists, he warned, but also «saving the face of the Muslims.» Ultimately, this would prove to be an unmanageable task. The sudden decision in early 1980 to replace Soviet Muslims (chiefly Central Asians) with ethnic Russian soldiers, on the Afghan battlefield, reinforces the picture of a Soviet leadership deeply frightened of radical Islam spreading beyond their own borders [8].

All of this evidence draws a clearer picture of Soviet intentions in Afghanistan. It is clear that this Southwest Asian campaign was aimed at securing Moscow's geopolitical and, to a lesser extent, ideological position in the region. The two nightmarish scenarios of either American intervention, or the spread of radical Islam into the USSR, helped shape the Soviet Union's decision to invade Afghanistan. Interestingly, both possibilities originated in the Iranian Revolution. We must now turn to the vital question of personal responsibility for the invasion. Whose intentions among the Soviet élite led to the Soviet-Afghan War? And whose interests were served by it? Firstly, we should recall that Leonid Brezhnev, the General Secretary of the Communist Party, by then «looked eerily like a zombie» Due to the Soviet leader's physically- and mentally-deteriorated state, an element of irrationality in the decision to occupy Afghanistan cannot be discounted. Following the dissolution of the USSR, some new evidence has surfaced, suggesting that the final decision was hatched by a small clique, and presented as a fait-accompli to Brezhnev to be rubber-stamped. The powerful trio, which shaped this policy, consisted of Defence Minister Dmitrii Ustinov, Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko and the head of the KGB, Yuri Andropov. The aforementioned figure,

Andropov, was the most influential in the decision making process. He had been the one to pressure Nikita Khrushchev in 1956 to invade Hungary and, once again in the late 1960s, was the foremost advocate of crushing the uprising in Prague. In the case of Afghanistan, Andropov was consistently «economical with the truth,» intentionally feeding the General Secretary misleading information on the actual military engagement [9]. We can infer that Afghanistan, like so many battlefields before and since, served the interests of military advancements. For example, some eyewitness accounts of Soviet soldiers hint at the use of chemical warfare against the Mujahideen – ostensibly a substance resembling ‘Agent Orange’ used by Americans during the Vietnam War. Another veteran’s account paints a more shocking picture of new hardware being tested on harmless Afghan villages in the last days of the war, out of no military necessity whatsoever. The Red Army command perhaps assumed that they could – with such combat experience – gain the upper hand in the case of a conventional war with US or European forces. In all probability, military testing in Afghanistan developed from war-time opportunism. Military planners certainly did foresee the problems of sending a «limited contingent» of a mere 75,000 soldiers to pacify a veritable war zone. In any case, the Soviet High Command was culpable of not voicing its arguments against an intervention

in Afghanistan with enough resolve. A strong objection could have acted «to deter Brezhnev and his inner circle.» [10].

Officially, some 14,833 Soviet soldiers lost their lives during the conflict. However, the actual number may eclipse the latter by at least ten thousand. The Afghan people were the war’s most obvious victims, with no less than one million civilians and combatants estimated killed during the conflict. To this day, the Afghans remain the world’s largest single refugee group, as a direct result of the Soviet-Afghan War. An estimated six million people fled to neighbouring Pakistan and Iran during the war. The «new thinking» associated with Mikhail Gorbachev’s policies of perestroika and glasnost placed strong pressure on the leadership to end the draining commitment in Afghanistan. «It is obvious that there are no alternatives. We must pull out,» wrote Gorbachev’s policy adviser in a diary entry in 1985. The Afghanistan Commission, and especially the powerful troika within it (Andropov, Gromyko and Ustinov) was primarily responsible for embroiling the Soviet Union in a costly, unjust and futile war in Afghanistan. This conflict bled the Red Army dry, as well as public support not merely for the war, but for the Soviet system itself. Above all, however, it is Brezhnev’s signature which adorns Politburo Decree P 176/125 – the signature responsible for the war’s disastrous implications [11].

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