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Aggression or Desperation:

Reevaluating the Soviet Motivations for Invading Afghanistan

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In the historiography of the Cold War, the pervading viewpoint has settled to resemble that of George Kennan's 1947 "X" article in *Foreign Affairs*, chiefly, that the Soviet Union was an expansionist power which sought to erode Western influence wherever it saw the opportunity. Soviet expansionism, it was thought, evolved from the fundamental characteristics of the Russian national character, reinforced by Marxist ideology and Soviet propaganda. But, beyond its contributions to the historical narrative of the Cold War, Kennan's article would provide the foundation for the Truman Doctrine and the subsequent policies pursued by the United States throughout the Cold War period; including American presuppositions about the motives behind the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. A reading of declassified Soviet and American documents, however, reveals that in the case of Afghanistan, much of what was assumed about the invasion was wrong. Indeed, the invasion of Afghanistan was neither a threat to Western security, nor was it a part of a grand Soviet plan to sway the balance of power in the Middle East. Alternatively, the Russo-Afghan War was a snare-trap set by the United States. The following dissertation aims to understand the political motivations of the

Soviet Union for its invasion into Afghanistan by analyzing declassified Soviet and American documents, while offering a historical critique of prior interpretations of the invasion.

At the time of the Soviet invasion, and for the decades which have followed it, analysts have posited that the invasion of Afghanistan was a major strategic advance by the Soviet Union as well as a setback to the United States and its Western allies. In 1988, Roseanne Klass of Freedom House expressed the following viewpoints in *Foreign Affairs*:

On April 27, 1978, after two centuries of Russian efforts to gain a foothold, the Soviet Union seized virtual control of Afghanistan through a bloody coup carried out by its agents in the Afghan air force and tank corps under the guidance of the Soviet Embassy in Kabul...The Soviet Union then dug in for a long-term war of subjugation along lines developed in its century-long conquest of Central Asia; in addition to the military action, the Soviets began the systematic creation of an infrastructure for permanent political and economic control.¹

Klass' point is straightforward: the 1979 intervention was the culmination of a longstanding plan, whereby the Soviet Union sought to use its conquest of Afghanistan as a way to dominate the Near East region and to threaten Western interests in that region. Similarly, Michael Cox, a British international relations scholar and professor emeritus at the London School of Economics, wrote "The Soviet threat was real enough. That much is obvious from any reading of the new primary sources."² While Cox is writing generally about the Soviet threat throughout the Cold War period, this notion remains unsupported in the specific case of Afghanistan.

While innumerable interpretations of the causative factors of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan have been put forward, the thematic undertones to the majority of interpretations are characterized by the notion of a "big-bad" Soviet Union hoping to disrupt the status quo. In

¹ Roseanne Klass, "Afghanistan: The Accords," *Foreign Affairs* 66, no. 5 (1988): 925-926.

² Michael Cox, "The Empire's Back in Town: Or America's Imperial Temptation – Again," *Journal of International Studies* 32, no.1 (2003): 10.

1983, Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, a Pakistani political scientist, summarized the pervading viewpoints on the invasion. By his account, there were nine total factors which had been attributed to the Soviet invasion; seven of which could be directly tied to notions of Soviet aggression.³ Amongst the factors listed, Cheema underscored the repeated use of the Russian quest for a warm-water port on the Arabian Sea nearer to the Gulf as a misunderstood justification for the Soviet invasion. By Cheema's account, the Soviet invasion could be attributed to the culmination of all nine of his points and not, simply, one primary factor. While Cheema's review of scholarly work on Afghanistan offers great insight into the early discourse of analysts on the invasion, access to declassified Soviet documents has disproven many of his points.

On December 28, 1979, Soviet combat troops moved into Afghanistan on a massive scale, killing President Hafiz Ullah Amin, and replacing him with Babrak Karmal. Since the Marxist Coup in 1978, this was the first occasion on which Soviet troops were directly engaged in deposing an incumbent Marxist leader of a country.⁴ The invasion had global implications, including a major shift in U.S. policy away from the restrained attitudes of détente toward a more forward and aggressive set of policies. As David N. Gibbs notes in *Reassessing Soviet Motives for Invading Afghanistan* that on a global level “the invasion was a watershed event, delegitimizing Soviet policy, and communism more generally, in the eyes of world public opinion.”⁵ The invasion was the largest Soviet military action since 1945, but

³ Pervaiz Cheema's causes of the Soviet invasion are listed as: 1. The lack of structure to detente which forced the Soviets to be more active in the Third World, 2. The fear of Islamic fundamentalism which had arisen in Iran, 3. Soviet sensitivity about its borders, 4. Soviet compensation for its poor response to the 1979 Sino-Vietnam war, 5. The acquisition of a warm-water port on the Arabian Sea, 6. The emergence of hardliners within the Kremlin who pushed for war, 7. Anxieties about the loss of Marxist leadership within Afghanistan, 8. Afghanistan could serve as a staging area for future Soviet engagements, and 9. To block American attempts at seizing Pakistan.

⁴ Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, “The Afghanistan Crisis and Pakistan's Security Dilemma,” *Asian Survey* 23, no. 3 (1983): 228.

⁵ David N. Gibbs, “Reassessing Soviet Motives for Invading Afghanistan,” *Critical Asian Studies* 38, no. 2 (2006):

also marked the third change-over in Afghan leadership since the death of President Mohammed Daoud Khan.

The Rise of Mohammed Daoud Khan

Afghanistan had been in political turmoil since July 17, 1973, when Mohammed Daoud Khan seized power from his cousin, King Zahir Shah. The background to the coup went back several years, when Daoud and left-wing elements came together. Soon after July 1973, Daoud explained, “for more than a year the subject of a coup was being considered by some friends, and various plans discussed. Only when anarchy and anti-national attitude of the regime reached its peak was the decision for action taken.”⁶ It was Daoud’s allies in the coup who raised speculation in the Western press that the July coup in Kabul was pro-Soviet, communist-directed or planned within the Soviet embassy. The meetings which Daoud referred to in his public statement were with liberals and left-wing officers and civil servants, but the coup itself was performed mainly by young army officers trained in the Soviet Union. Less than a month after the coup, Bernard Weinraub of The New York Times reported that “speculation abounds about the role of the army, once considered loyal to the monarchy. Virtually the entire officer corps was trained in the Soviet Union.”⁷

During his term as Prime Minister from 1953 to 1964, Daoud had ruled with an iron fist. Had he allowed the process of a constitutional monarchy to develop, it is probable that the Communists would have been swept away by the fast currents of liberalism. This,

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⁶ Anthony Hyman, *Afghanistan Under Soviet Domination 1964-1983*. (Macmillan Press: London) 1982: 64.

⁷ Bernard Weinraub, “Two Weeks After Coup, Afghan Government Remains Paralyzed and Public Seems Mostly Apathetic,” *New York Times*, August 1, 1973.

however, did not happen as Daoud regarded liberals as much a threat to monarchy as he feared communism.⁸ Although he tried in his early tenure to crush both, Daoud simultaneously acted to improve ties with the Soviet Union. In his second term, 1973-1979, both as Prime Minister and President, Daoud tried the reverse; he was soft on the Moscow Parcham party at home and relatively tough with Moscow. Following Daoud's coup, the Iranian government took special interest in Afghanistan and began to exert influence over its politics. During the mid-1970s, the Shah of Iran was seeking to use his country's oil wealth to establish Iran as a regional power. Beginning in 1973-74, the Shah pursued policies (supported by the United States) to move Afghanistan away from the Soviet orbit and into the Iranian orbit.

The Shah's efforts were twofold: First, a tripartite Iranian, U.S., and Pakistani project fomented opposition which resulted in a series of anti-Daoud revolts and coup attempts by Islamic extremist groups. Western support for these revolts was aimed at intimidating Daoud to force him to distance the regime from the Soviets.⁹ Second, the Shah offered Daoud a deal: Iran would outbid the Soviets and provide major aid insofar as Afghanistan was willing to pivot towards Iran and reorient itself with the Western side of the Cold War. Daoud accepted the Shah's proposal, likely due to the swelling aid promised from Iran. To fulfill the agreement, Daoud began sending Afghan military officers for training in Egypt and other Western countries, rather than in the Soviet Union. Additionally, Daoud adopted an anticommunist policy and repressed the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), which had been occupied by the Afghan intelligentsia who supported the Soviets.

⁸ Syed Shabbir Hussain, *Afghanistan under Soviet Occupation*. (World Affairs Publications, Islamabad) 1980: 95.

⁹ Diego Cordovez and Selig S. Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan: The inside story of the Soviet withdrawal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 16.

The 1974 realignment encouraged by the Shah caused the Soviets to increase their activity in Afghanistan. In lieu of his agreement with Iran and to counter Soviet influence, President Daoud strived to accord new direction to Kabul's diplomacy while reaffirming its neutrality. His visit to Moscow was balanced by a visit to Washington; a call with Indian leaders was matched by a similar meeting with the leaders of Pakistan, and aid from the Soviet Union was equaled by the assistance obtained from Iran.¹⁰ Fearful that relations with Afghanistan were waning, the Soviets worked with the pro-Moscow Communist Party of India in 1977 to encourage the PDPA to settle its factional disputes and to reunite.

Political Disturbances within the PDPA

In 1965, in response to a democratization effort initiated by the monarch, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan had been formed to serve as an Afghan communist party. The PDPA was a non-ethnic political force, one of the few in a country where politics had a distinctly regional and ethnic orientation. The base of support for the PDPA was primarily intellectuals - a category which symbolized anyone with a secondary education. The PDPA suffered inherent weaknesses from its inception. The party had little influence among the peasant classes and struggled to gain support outside of elite urban circles. The "godless" character of Marxist ideology had little appeal to the deeply religious rural population and the party's advocacy of female equality was wildly unpopular.¹¹ Factionalism also plagued the PDPA: it was divided between the Parcham faction, led by Babrak Karmal and the Khalq faction, led by Mohammed Nur Taraki and Hafizullah Amin.

¹⁰ Syed Shabbir Hussain, *Afghanistan under Soviet Occupation*, 96.

¹¹ David N. Gibbs, "Reassessing Soviet Motives for Invading Afghanistan," 245.

The infighting within the PDPA had roused the attention of the Soviets by 1974. In an internal brief, the Soviet Politburo outlined a letter to the leaders of the PDPA factions: Babrak Karmal and Mohammed Taraki. Expressing their fears of civil unrest, the Soviets insisted that the internal issues of the PDPA were “leading to a weakening of both sides, and...introducing a split in the ranks of progressive forces and the democratic movement as a whole.”¹² According to the Soviets, the situation that had been created in Afghanistan could “gladden only the domestic and foreign enemies” of the republic.¹³ Although the Soviets openly encouraged the reunification of the PDPA in 1977, Soviet officials remained skeptical of PDPA leadership. Soviet policymakers and analysts dismissed any suggestion of a prospective socialist or communist Afghanistan, a country which they deemed hopelessly backwards and beyond reform. As reported by Louis Dupree, one Soviet official scoffed, “If there is one country in the developing world where we would like not to try scientific socialism at this point in time, it is Afghanistan.”¹⁴ Throughout the mid-1970s, the Soviet Union tried to strike a balance between supporting Communist allies within Afghanistan and encouraging their support of the Daoud government.

The Soviet Union spent the preceding years of the invasion trying to calm tensions amongst PDPA members and ease tensions with Daoud. A declassified Soviet memo from June 2, 1974, confirms that the leaders of the so-called “progressive” political organizations of Afghanistan, the “Parcham” and “Khalq” factions of the PDPA, had been in unofficial contact with the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CC CPSU) via the KGB Resident in Kabul soon after the establishment of the Daoud regime in 1973. While the

¹² January 8, 1974. Decree of the Secretariat of the CC CPSU - An appeal to the Leaders of the PDPA Groups ‘Parcham’ and ‘Khalq.’

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Louis Dupree, “Afghanistan under the Khalq,” *Problems of Communism* 28, no. 4 (1979): 50.

Soviets were aware that the rivaling factions of the PDPA had been using internecine fighting “to strengthen the positions and influence of their groups for the right to ‘represent the Communist Party’ in the country,”¹⁵ they also recognized the destabilizing effects of the fighting on the central government of Afghanistan. During his early tenure, Daoud had begun receiving briefs that leftist forces were planning to remove him from power if he did not try to accelerate social and economic reforms which would place Afghanistan on a socialist path of development. Fearful that the demands of the leftist forces would be attributed to Soviet influence, the Politburo had penned a letter to both Taraki and Karmal, encouraging them to end their factional disputes and concentrate their combined efforts on comprehensive support of the republican regime within the country. However, by June of 1974, the infighting had once again alarmed observers in Moscow, leading them to believe “it would be advisable to again state this recommendation to [Karmal and Taraki].”¹⁶ As the 1970s progressed, however, it became clearer that the Soviet warnings had not been heeded.

Political Turmoil and the Assassination of President Daoud

During 1977-1978, as the Soviets worked with the Communist Party of India to unify the PDPA, a series of repressive measures directed by Afghan Interior Minister Abdul Nurstani resulted in the arrest of the top communist leadership. The arrests triggered the pro-PDPA officers of the military, led by air force Lt. Col. Abdul Qader, to revolt. On April 27, 1978, the Saur Revolution had ensured the death of President Daoud and the placement of

¹⁵ June 2, 1974. Information for the Leaders of the Progressive Afghan Political Organizations “Parcham” and “Khalq” Concerning the Results of the Visit of Mohammed Daud to the USSR.

¹⁶ June 2, 1974. Information for the Leaders of the Progressive Afghan Political Organizations “Parcham” and “Khalq” Concerning the Results of the Visit of Mohammed Daud to the USSR.

Mohammed Taraki as president and party leader. Hafizullah Amin, arguably the real power, would serve as foreign minister. On April 28, 1978, William Borders of *The New York Times* wrote that "... there was no indication that the new rulers were any more friendly than the old Government had been to the Soviet Union."¹⁷ While there may have been Soviet complicity in the coup, the April 1978 takeover was mainly a homegrown, Afghan affair. Former KGB officer Alexander Morozov stated, in an interview after the Cold War had concluded, that the Soviets only became aware of the coup plans shortly before it had begun. After discovering the plans, Soviet officials in Kabul received "confused messages" from the Foreign Ministry and KGB headquarters about how they were expected to respond and, in many cases, they improvised.¹⁸ In the immediate aftermath of the coup, Soviet officials remained cautious, declining to endorse the PDPA as a communist government.

In a letter to the Soviet Foreign Ministry, dated May 31, 1978, Ambassador Alexander Puzanov noted that the Daoud regime's attempted arrests of PDPA party officials had led to his overthrow. Daoud, it was stated by Puzanov, "expressed the interests and class position of bourgeois landowners and rightist nationalist forces, and therefore was not capable of carrying out a reformation in the interests of the broad laboring masses, primarily agricultural reform."¹⁹ Ambassador Puzanov noted that the new government was not "showing haste" in concluding economic agreements with the West, but that it was proceeding to reorient its foreign economic relations primarily to the "USSR and socialist camp." While Puzanov does mention that the new government would, hopefully, be more sympathetic to Soviet policy and strengthen the relations between the USSR and Afghanistan, he makes no mention of Soviet

¹⁷ William Borders, "Coup is Reported in Afghanistan," *New York Times* April 28, 1978.

¹⁸ Diego Cordovez and Selig Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan*, 27.

¹⁹ May 31, 1978. Alexander Puzanov. Letter from USSR Ambassador to Afghanistan.

involvement in the coup, nor does Puzanov imply that the Soviets had expected the coup to take place. The lack of dialogue about the Soviet perspective of the coup seemingly affirms Alexander Morozov's assertion that the Soviets were caught off-guard by the Saur Revolution.

In any case, the PDPA suddenly found itself in power with little preparation and no plan of action. Despite the 1977 reunification, the party remained seriously divided between the Parcham and Khalq factions. Adding to the division, both President Taraki and Foreign Minister Amin were Khalquis. Puzanov's May 1978 letter highlighted this division and explained that the friction between the Khalq and Parcham factions was having a negative influence on government affairs. The ambassador's fears were justified given the repression and purging which followed the PDPA takeover. By late 1978, the purging of the Parcham faction had become so serious that a notable sense of alarm can be seen within Soviet materials. A document from September 1978 mentions that Barbrak Karmal had been recalled from his ambassadorial post by the Afghan government, but that he "[could not] return to Afghanistan because he would be arrested, perhaps even executed."²⁰ Karmal, reportedly, was also fearful that his return, as well as that of his other Parcham comrades, would result in "great social disturbances" and an "eventual uprising against Taraki," which illustrates the severity of the PDPA's factional divisions.

Two months later, in October 1978, a representative from the USSR Central Committee was sent to Afghanistan to put a stop to the mass repressions which were increasing in severity. Signs of a still inchoate conflict between the Soviet leaders and their Afghan protégés appear in the memorandum which recounted the event. The October 13th memorandum noted: "Our

²⁰ Memorandum of Conversation between the deputy minister of foreign affairs Dusan Spacil and Soviet Ambassador Novikov, September 12, 1978.

ideas were attentively heard out, but with visible tension. Without disputing them directly, the Afghan leaders tried to justify their policy by accusing the Parchamists... of anti-government activities. “Even before the revolution we did not trust ‘Parcham,’” said N. Taraki, “And the union with the Parchamists was strictly a formality.”²¹ Despite the warnings of the Soviet advisors, the Taraki government continued its purges. Not only were these ghastly acts capturing the attention of the Soviets, but in the United States news of the PDPA purges against the Parchamists was painting a grim picture of Afghan daily life. One month after the Soviet’s meeting with Taraki, William Borders penned “Searchlights in Kabul: A New Symbol of Repression” in the November 21, 1978 issue of the *New York Times*. A nameless Afghan professor said of the lights, “They [the Afghan government] want to remind us that they’re watching. The searchlights are big brother, always there, all-knowing.”²² As 1978 drew to a close, the Soviet Union enacted a large-scale military aid program to the PDPA to allow it to combat the growing mujahidin forces, while the searchlights still scanned the Kabul nights for dissidents and revolutionaries.

Shifting Attitudes for Invasion

Despite the Soviet Union’s military aid programs and the deployment of roughly five-hundred and fifty advisors to Afghanistan, Soviet officials remained wary of their Afghan allies. In March 1979, tensions heightened after a major rebellion broke out in the city of Herat and a sizable portion of the Afghan army defected to the mujahidin, along with much of their heavy equipment. Moscow and Kabul both worried that the PDPA could lose control altogether and

²¹ Information from CC CPSU to GDR leader Erich Honecker, October 13, 1978.

²² William Borders, “Searchlights in Kabul: A New Symbol of Repression,” *New York Times*, November 21, 1978.

the Afghan communists began to appeal to Moscow for the immediate dispatch of Soviet combat forces to assist in quelling the rebellion. On March 17, 1979, key Soviet decision-makers met to weigh the requests for combat troops. Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko argued "...under no circumstances may we lose Afghanistan."²³ Similarly, Premier Alexei Kosygin stated: "We must put up a struggle for Afghanistan."²⁴ Amongst Politburo members, the mood seemed favorable to intervention on behalf of the PDPA. It should be noted, however, that no mention was made about any implied "strategic advantages" that might flow from a Soviet combat presence in Afghanistan. The concerns raised in the March 17, 1979 meeting were strictly defensively oriented toward preserving the preexisting sphere of influence, rather than seeking bases for future expansion.

When the Shah of Iran was overthrown in January 1979 and the Afghan insurgency against the PDPA regime had grown, the status quo was quickly disrupted. Iran became hostile to both the Soviet Union and the United States and it seemed that an Islamic movement might topple the Afghan government. The Soviets had previously existed with a pro-Western Iran, but losing Afghanistan would create a larger problem. If not kept solidly under Soviet influence, Afghanistan could become a third hostile country on its southern border.²⁵ These concerns, coupled with the Soviet security commitment to Afghanistan under Article 4 of their friendship treaty, likely contributed the sentiments expressed by Soviet leadership on March 17. Article 4 of the friendship treaty stated that, in extreme cases, both countries would take appropriate measures to secure the independence and territorial integrity of the other, which placed Soviet

²³ March 17, 1979. Transcript of CC CPSU Politburo Discussions on Afghanistan.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Joseph Collins, "Soviet Policy toward Afghanistan." *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science* 36, no.4 (1987): 200.

leadership in a legal bind.²⁶

On March 18, however, the tone of the Politburo members had changed. Having had time to reflect on the situation, the consensus of the group moved in opposition of direct intervention - recognizing that it could be a costly mistake. KGB chief Yuri Andropov set the tone of the meeting with his remarks:

We must consider very, very seriously the question of whose cause we will be supporting if we deploy our forces into Afghanistan. It's completely clear to us that Afghanistan is not ready at this time to resolve all of the issues it faces through socialism. We know Lenin's teaching about a revolutionary situation. Whatever situation we are talking about in Afghanistan, it is not that type of situation.²⁷

Andropov was succeeded by Gromyko, who had also changed his mind and supported Andropov's decision not to invade:

I completely support Comrade Andropov's proposal...one must ask, and what would we gain? Afghanistan with its present government, with a backward economy, with inconsequential weight in international affairs. On the other side, we must keep in mind that from a legal point of view too we would not be justified in sending troops.²⁸

It seemed that the Politburo had completely reversed its position overnight. In subsequent phone calls between Kosygin and Taraki, the Soviets would continue to hold to their position that Soviet troops would not intervene in Afghanistan's affairs. Indeed, Soviet efforts continued to stray away from military confrontation and focused on political changes within the PDPA. Through the spring and summer of 1979, Afghan officials repeatedly requested Soviet combat personnel to assist in fighting the mujahidin; the Soviets swiftly rejected these requests. On March 20, Taraki flew to Moscow for face-to-face meetings and to make another

²⁶ Collins, *Soviet Policy toward Afghanistan*, 200.

²⁷ CC CPSU Politburo Decisions on Afghanistan, March 18, 1979.

²⁸ Ibid.

plea for Soviet forces. In his meeting with Leonid Brezhnev, Taraki was once again told “no.” Brezhnev emphasized the Soviet view that an invasion of Afghanistan would be poorly timed and carry large ramifications: “And now for the question of the possibility of deploying Soviet military forces in Afghanistan. We examined this question from every angle, weighed it carefully, and, I will tell you frankly: this should not be done. This would play into the hands of the enemies — yours and ours.”²⁹ Through his March 20 proceedings with Taraki, Brezhnev is staunchly anti-intervention and stresses the need for party unity, economic assistance, and border control. Within the meeting record, it seems that Brezhnev was more concerned with Afghanistan’s open borders with Pakistan and Iran than the repeated Afghan requests for troops.

By September 1979, the situation in Afghanistan had deteriorated further. Hafizullah Amin, President Taraki’s Foreign Minister, aligned with the extreme elements of the PDPA and staged a coup—seizing full power. Taraki was arrested and later executed by Amin’s associates. Soviet documents from this period begin to sound more anxious. In a cable dated September 15, 1979, Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko insists that his representatives in Kabul “use all means to restrain H. Amin from repressions of supporters of N. Taraki and other people who are not pleasing to him.”³⁰ The foreign minister goes on to express his desire for Soviet military advisers to stay at their posts, but warns that none should be involved in Amin’s oppression. Despite orders to restrain Amin, the Soviets remained steadfastly against armed intervention. In a conversation between Soviet Ambassador Puzanov and Amin on November 3, 1979, the Soviet Ambassador reported the readiness of the Soviet leadership to accept Amin and went on to praise the Afghan leadership for its measures in party and state

²⁹ Record of Conversation between L.I. Brezhnev and N.M. Taraki, March 20, 1979.

³⁰ Cable from Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko to Soviet Representatives in Kabul, September 15, 1979.

building. The Soviet's relationship with Amin, however, was complicated and fragile.

During the fall of 1979, key Politburo figures became convinced that Amin was shifting his allegiance away from the USSR and toward the United States. U.S. officials, they believed, were encouraging such a shift and aiming to undermine Soviet influence. While no documentary evidence exists within the National Security Archives to substantiate this, what remains important is that the Soviets believed it to be true. Soviet leadership publicly supported Amin, but behind closed doors the Politburo feared he was a Western agent. In early December 1979, KGB chief Andropov wrote to Brezhnev expressing his concerns over Amin:

At the same time, alarming information started to arrive about Amin's secret activities forewarning of a possible political shift to the West. [These included:] Contacts with an American agent about issues which are kept secret from us. Promises to tribal leaders to shift away from the USSR and to adopt a 'policy of neutrality.' Closed meetings in which attacks were made against Soviet policy and the activities of our specialists. The practical removal of our headquarters in Kabul, etc.³¹

While it remains difficult to verify these Western contacts with Amin, it should be noted that American interest in Afghanistan was growing by 1979. On July 3, 1979, President Jimmy Carter signed a directive authorizing the Central Intelligence Agency to funnel cash or "non military supplies" to Afghan insurgents. With this directive, the CIA began covertly aiding the mujahidin guerrillas several months before the Soviet invasion. In a 1998 interview, Zbigniew Brzezinski, a former national security advisor to President Carter, acknowledged that this aid program was funded with the understanding that "it was going to induce a Soviet military intervention."³²

Shortly after KGB chief Andropov shared his revelations with Brezhnev, the invasion of Afghanistan commenced. While there are no declassified records of the decision, the

³¹ Personal Memorandum Andropov to Brezhnev, December 01, 1979.

³² Zbigniew Brzezinski (former national security advisor) in discussion with David N. Gibbs, January 15, 1998.

invasion order has been made available to the public. Handwritten on a piece of paper, the order to invade was, reportedly, penned in the early hours of the morning and signed by Brezhnev across the middle. Following the order, Directive N 312/12/001 of December 24, 1979, was signed by Soviet Minister of Defense Dmitri Ustinov and Chief of the General Staff Nikolai Ogarkov. The directive outlined the pretenses of the invasion and the Soviet Union's ambitions within Afghanistan:

Considering the military-political situation in the Middle East, the latest appeal of the government of Afghanistan has been favorably considered. The decision has been made to introduce several contingents of Soviet troops deployed in southern regions of the country to the territory of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan in order to give international aid to the friendly Afghan people and also to create favorable conditions to interdict possible anti-Afghan actions from neighboring countries.³³

Three days after the directive was signed, Soviet forces would begin moving into Afghanistan to seize control.

On the evening of December 27, 1979, Operation Storm was completed following the successful takeover of the Tajbeg Palace outside Kabul and the assassination of Afghan President Hafizullah Amin. With Amin exterminated, the Soviets were able to install Karmal Babrak, a Parchamist, into power. On the same day as the assassination on Amin, Brezhnev wrote to Babrak to express his congratulations on Babrak's rise to power:

I heartily congratulate you on [your] election as General Secretary of the PDPA and high government posts of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. In the name of the Soviet leadership and on behalf of myself personally I wish you great success in all your multifarious activity for the good of the Afghan people. I am confident that in the present circumstances the Afghan people will be able to defend the gains of the April Revolution, the sovereignty, the independence, and the national dignity of the new Afghanistan.³⁴

³³ Directive N 312/12/001 December 1979 Signed by Ustinov and Ogarkov, December 24, 1979.

³⁴ Letter from Leonid Brezhnev to Karmal Babrak, Attachment to CPSU Politburo Protocol #177, December 27, 1979.

Despite Brezhnev's upbeat tone, the Politburo was already calculating its potential losses and aiming to exit Afghanistan as quick as possible. The invasion, which had been anticipated to lead to an occupation of 2 to 3 months, would lead the Soviet Union into a snare-trap.

Until the very last days before Soviet boots marched onto Afghan soil, the Politburo remained against invading. Knowing that the invasion would be a costly, drawn-out, and controversial affair, the Soviets exhausted their diplomatic means — aiming to stabilize the country. A lethal cocktail of Amin's repression, civil unrest, and pressure from the West would force the Soviet Union into its very own Vietnam-type conflict. This disastrous war, which would claim an estimated 15,000 Soviets and two million Afghan lives, remains a convoluted moment with innumerable factors playing roles in the decision to invade. What is clear, however, from the declassified Soviet documents as well as interviews from American and Russian experts, is that the conventional notion of a "big-bad Soviet" is wrong. In the case of Afghanistan, the root cause of Soviet activity should be understood more as desperation than aggression.

About the author

Kyle J. Sallee is an undergraduate student of Portland State University who studies Cold War History and Political Science. Kyle's academic interests center around Russian geopolitics, European security, and Russian history. Sallee has written on topics ranging from the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Russian annexation of Crimea, Russia's nuclear agreements with the United States, and the Russian Federations' attempts to forge a geopolitical identity. Upon completion of his Bachelor's degree, Mr. Sallee intends to pursue his dream of entering the

Foreign Service and representing the United States abroad.

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