

MOSCOW TO KABUL: ETHNIC CONFLICT AND SOVIET COLLAPSE

Spencer Level

History 2C: World History

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Although ethnic nationalism and democratization contributed greatly to the downfall of the Soviet Union, the primary catalyst of Soviet collapse was the Soviet-Afghan War. The conflict exacerbated existing ethnic and cultural divides in the hinterlands of the Soviet empire, and the dramatic Russian loss broadcasted the fact that the Red Army was not invincible to foreign powers and internal dissidents alike, emboldening the first breakaway republics and enabling the eventual dissolution of the Soviet Union. To understand the Soviet-Afghan war—its causes and its effects—is to understand the collapse of the world’s largest superpower.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan had its roots in the 1978 Saur Revolution, which removed former Afghan president Daoud Khan and installed the communist People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA)¹. The PDPA, formed of two feuding communist parties, Khalq—of Hafizullah Amin and Nur Muhammad Taraki—and Parcham, of Babrak Karmal²—was ineffective at suppressing dissent in the countryside, away from Kabul and the urban centers of Communist power, and led to a March revolt in Helmand Province.³ This soon expanded into a nationwide revolt and full-scale civil war against PDPA rule. Soviet discontent with this turn of events against what they hoped was a “‘cheap’ victory for socialism and for the Soviet state,”⁴ and a perception in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) that Amin was incompetent, led to plans to put Taraki in place—only for Amin to have him assassinated. The opening phase of what would become the Soviet Union’s fatal wound ended in December of 1979 when Amin was removed from power, and Karmal put in place, with the assistance of Soviet special forces. Karmal was believed to be a “more sophisticated and less abrasive Marxist than Amin,”⁵ whose left-wing reformism distanced him from CPSU orthodoxy. Thus began a decade⁶ of increasing Soviet military involvement in Afghanistan. Despite ever-increasing deployments of troops to the nation, Soviet control over the nation was essentially static and

limited to the Afghanistan ring road circling the less montane center of the nation, and the major urban areas serviced by the road—initially built with Soviet foreign aid in the 1970s to facilitate the opening phase of the invasion in 1979.⁷

The cause for Soviet intervention, and later Soviet invasion, in Afghanistan lies in the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the 1970s. Starting with the Iranian Revolution, and continuing with an Indian pivot away from Soviet influence after the fall of Indira Gandhi's government in 1977⁸, South Asia was increasingly distant from Soviet influence, to the dismay of the CPSU and Soviet premier Leonid Brezhnev. Though Iran was ostensibly a Russian ally, the Iranian Revolution showed Muslims living in Soviet Central Asia, who had been made second-class citizens in their own territories and subjected to communist economic policies drastically at odds with traditional organization in those regions, that they too could re-establish their former governments and free themselves of influence from foreign superpowers. The significance of the Revolution in Soviet Central Asia created ripples that even reached the New York Times: a 1978, pre-invasion article states that “the indigenous people ... tend to adopt the customs of their Russian protectors rather than the other way round. It is the kind of mechanism that operated in [British] India ... An Uzbek-speaking Russian once turned to a foreigner at a restaurant table there and, in the presence of his Uzbek guests, said, “Lenin said, ‘Know your enemies,’” and grinned.”⁹ Clearly, the fragility of Soviet imperial ambitions in Central Asia were well-known to the Soviets themselves; when the Kremlin invaded a year after the Times article's publication, it did so in part to “protect the territorial security and political stability of the Soviet Central Asian Muslim republics against a spillover of the revolutionary and anticommunist Islamic nationalism in Afghanistan”.¹⁰ Afghanistan and the PDPA also provided the CPSU with a serendipitous territorial claim on the Pashtun region of Pakistan, an American ally, which suggested to

Brezhnev a future Soviet Baluchistan and thus a secularized and coastal nation by which the Soviet Union could project naval power directly into the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. Having conquered Central Asia by 1930¹¹, the Soviets were confident in their ability to conquer Afghanistan, a poor and backwater nation, and prove the Red Army was invincible against Islamic fundamentalism and nationalist partisans. They would prove the exact opposite.

When Soviet forces crossed the Friendship Bridge into Afghanistan in 1979, they were primarily composed not of European Russian soldiers, but of the exact minorities of various SSRs¹² for whom the invasion of Afghanistan was supposed to signal Russian cultural and military superiority, and the stability of the multi-ethnic Soviet state. Soviet military strategy explicitly rejected counterinsurgency as a reactionary and western line of thought,¹³ and the Red Army attempted to employ the same strategy it used to suppress the Prague Spring in Afghanistan: Seize urban centers of power, fortify them, establish rural outposts, and quash any partisan resistance quickly. Afghanistan was no Czechoslovakia for the Soviet Union, and the Mujahidin quickly adapted to attacking Soviet supply lines on the Afghan Ring Road and bringing down Russian helicopters with American-supplied Stinger missiles. As the losses started to mount, the political establishments of the Central Asian SSRs took note: “[T]he non-Russian Soviet republics perceived it as a Russian war fought by non-Russian soldiers. Moreover, they noticed the similarities between the Russian oppression of Afghanistan and of the non-Russian Soviet republics. The war therefore seriously eroded the legitimacy of the Soviet system and encouraged secession by the non-Russian republics.”¹⁴ Evidently, the situation in Afghanistan was not evolving in the favor of the Red Army. Brezhnev Doctrine had mandated iron-fisted interventions in Eastern Europe in the 1970s to maintain the Iron Curtain; implementation of the same strategy in a mountainous, rural, and deeply religious country was

another animal. Soviet attempts to secularize the Afghan hinterland went as well as their attempts to dislodge the Mujahidin. This too backfired on Soviet leadership, where “[i]n Tajikistan, the mullahs publicly opposed the war, claiming that the Soviets were trying to convert the Afghans into kafirs¹⁵.”¹⁶ Culture and religion were interacting in Afghanistan in ways that were exacerbating the tensions that the Soviets had first intervened in Afghanistan to wipe away; worse still, they were creating a new caste of Soviet citizen to champion the new anti-Secular, anti-Russian cause.

Between the rapidly growing number of Soviet casualties in Afghanistan and Premier Mikhail Gorbachev’s Glasnost and Perestroika,¹⁷ the Russian state found itself both incapable and unwilling to suppress the expanding class of war veterans who had returned from Afghanistan disabled and disillusioned with the Soviet central government. These ‘Afghantsy’ increased in number as the war continued, and their public disapproval of Soviet military and civilian leadership alike struck, for the first time, a publicly credible counter-narrative to tales of Soviet invincibility¹⁸ wrought by interventions east of the Iron Curtain and victory in the Great Patriotic War.¹⁹ When, in 1989, Gorbachev formalized the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, he all but admitted not only Soviet defeat in the country,²⁰ but the failure of the Soviet regime and system of governance to enforce its will in the way that was necessary to maintain the USSR as a political entity. Alexandre Bennigsen, a scholar of Islam and the Sovietization of Central Asia, wrote of the Soviet-Afghan war, “It would be demonstrated that Soviet might was not invincible and that resistance is possible. What are the Afghans for Central Asia? It is a small, wild and poor country. So then, if the Afghans could inflict a military and political defeat, then that makes anything possible. And everyone in Central Asia knows that. I think that in Soviet Russia they know it too.”²¹ As Bennigsen put it, in Central Asia and Soviet Russia both, the Red

Army's defeat at the hands of what amounted to poorly-armed farmers and guerrillas inspired far more consequential rebellions, and eventually, far more fatal defeats, within areas considered to be the core of Soviet territory. Under Gorbachev, and therefore not under a totalitarian regime capable of censoring, imprisoning, and executing dissidents, the ability of the CPSU and the Soviet Union as a whole to cope with such a blow was minimal—as evidenced by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, two years after withdrawal from Afghanistan.

The Soviet Union at the time of the withdrawal was not in a commanding state, and not just in terms of military power or ethnic stability. Gorbachev's Perestroika reforms had tanked the Soviet economy from the already middling position in the Era of Stagnation, as Gorbachev put it, under his predecessor Brezhnev. Withdrawal from the war in Afghanistan was seen as one of a number of last-ditch efforts to save the Soviet economy, the credibility of the Red Army, and the political stability of the nation in general:

By December 1988, Gorbachev announced a unilateral 500,000 man cutback ... generals seemed to believe that troop withdrawals could increase long term Soviet security[.] ... Also, Gorbachev's much publicized characterization of the occupation as a 'bleeding wound' and a 'running sore' had made many observers assume that Moscow regarded it as a grievous blunder. Many Soviet leaders had openly criticized the invasion and the decision-making process that led to it. Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze admitted in his 23 October 1989 foreign policy address to the Supreme Soviet that the invasion of Afghanistan was 'illegal' and 'ignored universal human values'.²²

Shevardnadze's mention of illegal and ignored universal human values was about to ring true for far more citizens in the Soviet Union and its periphery than just in Afghanistan. The so-called Parade of Sovereignties was just beginning: Estonia asserted its sovereignty over its territory in 1988, entering a “direct constitutional confrontation with the Soviet Union,”²³ and trailblazing a pathway that would be followed shortly by Estonia's Baltic sister nations, and the remainder of the pro-Soviet Communist regimes in the Iron Curtain. The Red Army, without the

political will or military capability to invade Latvia and Georgia as it had invaded Czechoslovakia and Hungary, essentially sat and watched as Lithuania declared outright independence in 1990, a move that was far from unpredictable during the Afghanistan withdrawal in 1989: “A few weeks after the withdrawal from Afghanistan in February 1989, the Lithuanian democratic movement, Sajudis, declared that its goal was full independence from Moscow ... in Latvia, groups regularly staged protests outside army bases, carrying posters with slogans such as ‘USSR armed forces are occupation forces’.”²⁴ The end was nigh for the Soviet Union as a whole, and it was wrought finally by a coup attempt against Gorbachev. While it failed to remove him from power, when the dust cleared from the shelled Russian White House, Gorbachev’s credibility was completely gone; the Union collapsed 18 months after the Lithuanian declaration of independence, by which time every other SSR in the Union—including the Central Asian SSRs, who had bled for Afghanistan—had since declared sovereignty and independence.²⁵ Afghanistan returned to the Mujahidin, now collectively organized under the Taliban, which would embolden the Chechens and Circassians when the newly non-Soviet Russian regime turned its imperial ambitions once again onto its Muslim edges.

Driven initially by fears of American influence probing into the soft underbelly of the Soviet Union, and of grand geopolitical encirclement and isolation in the Indian Ocean, the war in Afghanistan quickly drew one of two global superpowers into a quagmire that would suffocate its already-stagnant economy, destroy the credibility of its military might and planning superiority, and disillusion countless Soviet soldiers from the patriotism they carried with them across the Friendship Bridge into the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. Worst of all, the ethnic tensions that the Soviet Union sought to suppress through a quick victory for Socialism in yet another Central Asian nation were instead brought to an international limelight by Soviet

military and political failure, worse still by employing the very minorities the Soviets intended to reassure in operations that pitted them against soldiers of their own region, religion, and ethnicity, under the command of generals with whom they shared none of those categories. The end result was painfully predictable: the Graveyard of Empires, a term coined in the Old Testament, was an overmatch for the politically and economically declining Soviet Union of the 1980s. Without a general loss of confidence in the Soviet Union by its citizens, there would have been no collapse; without nation-fracturing ethnic tensions there would have been no loss of confidence; and without the folly that was the Soviet-Afghan war, there would have been no ethnic tensions to dissolve the Soviet Union.

¹ Minton F. Goldman, "Soviet Military Intervention in Afghanistan: Roots & Causes" (Boston: Polity, 1984), 385.

² Odd Arne Westad, "Prelude to Invasion: The Soviet Union and the Afghan Communists, 1978-1979" (Milton Park: The International History Review, 1994), 51.

³ Odd Arne Westad, 57.

⁴ Odd Arne Westad, 65.

⁵ Minton F. Goldman, 387.

⁶ The withdrawal began on May 15th, 1988, and ended on February 15th, 1989, when the last Soviet forces left the country; the communist PDPA would hold onto power until 1992, when they were defeated by the Taliban.

⁷ Minton F. Goldman, 385.

⁸ William H. Overholt, "The Geopolitics of the Afghan War" (Milton Park: Asian Affairs: An American Review, 1994), 206.

⁹ Craig R. Whitney, "Tadzhiks and Uzbeks Try to Live the Way Russians Do" (New York: The New York Times, 1978).

¹⁰ Minton F. Goldman, 403.

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- ¹¹ Michael Dobbs, “The Afghan Archive: Dramatic Politburo Meeting Led to End of War” (Washington, D.C.: The Washington Post, 1992), A16.
- ¹² SSR stands for Soviet Socialist Republic: the basic administrative unit of the Soviet Union. SSRs had minimal to no autonomy from the government.
- ¹³ A. Z. Hilali, “Afghanistan: The Decline of Soviet Military Strategy and Political Status” (Milton Park: The Journal of Slavic Military Studies, 1999), 100.
- ¹⁴ Rafael Reuveny and Aseem Prakash, “The Afghanistan War and breakdown of the Soviet Union” (Cambridge: Review of International Studies, 1999), 704.
- ¹⁵ Nonbeliever; infidel.
- ¹⁶ Rafael Reuveny and Aseem Prakash, 704.
- ¹⁷ Glasnost, meaning ‘openness’ or transparency, and Perestroika, representing transformational economic and political reforms.
- ¹⁸ Rafael Reuveny and Aseem Prakash, 697.
- ¹⁹ Soviet term for World War II on the European front.
- ²⁰ The Democratic Republic of Afghanistan survived until 1992, but the Soviets publicly declared the war in Afghanistan as a loss upon the withdrawal of Soviet forces, as per Gorbachev.
- ²¹ Alexandre Bennigsen, “RS 58/88” (Washington, D.C.: Radio Liberty Research, 1988), 6.
- ²² A.Z. Hilali, 112-113.
- ²³ Stanislaw Frankowski and Paul B. Stephan, *Legal Reform in Post-Communist Europe* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers: 1995), 84.
- ²⁴ Rafael Reuveny and Aseem Prakash, 700.
- ²⁵ “The Fall of the Soviet Union” (Digital: Center for European Studies, 2023).

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