

Afghanistan's Political Crisis that led to the Soviet Invasion

Casey W. Ralston

This article examines the reasons for the Soviet Union's involvement in Afghanistan from 1950-1989. It analyzes Afghanistan's desires and political movements that led to the Soviet Union invading Afghanistan in December 1979. It further analyzes the events and timeline that set Afghanistan up to become communist and how the political decisions were made, leading to several coups and changes in leadership and reforms that led the country to disarray and civil unrest. The article examines the Soviet Union's interests in Afghanistan and decision-making process that prompted the Soviets to send military troops to overthrow the government and invade the country. This decision was not made lightly and resulted in an unsuccessful 10-year war.

This article will focus on the period of time between 1950-1979 identifying four shifts in political power, three coups and the subsequent Soviet invasion of 1979. The modern state of Afghanistan was founded in 1747, by Ahmad Shah Durrani, who unified Afghan tribes and led his country to independence until his death in 1772.¹ After Duranni's death, the country found itself in the middle of conflict that led to the clash between the British Indian and Russian empires in Central Asia, known as "the Great Game." Britain would engage in three Anglo-Afghan wars in an effort to oppose Russian influence and establish dominance in Afghanistan to create a buffer state. The last Anglo-Afghan war only lasted a short while due to the demands of World War I but garnered Afghanistan independence and the right to conduct its own foreign affairs as an independent state with the Treaty of Rawalpindi.² Prior to signing the final documents with Britain, Afghanistan established diplomatic relations with the new Bolshevik government and signed an Afghan-Soviet nonaggression pact in 1921, a relationship which would last until 1979. Afghanistan would experiment with democracy from 1963-1973, which would end in a "1973 coup and a 1978 communist counter-coup."³ It has been argued that the Soviet-Afghan War stands out in 20th century history as contributing strongly to the collapse of the Soviet Union's communist party, "playing a decisive contributing role in the disintegration of the USSR" and leading to the uprising of al-Qaeda taking root as a consequence of the war according to Gregory Fremont-Barnes. The Soviet-Afghan war left Afghanistan in external and domestic turmoil without a stable government and created a breeding ground for Islamic extremist groups. Forty years after Soviet military crossed into Afghanistan, the United States and coalition forces would still be attempting to stabilize the region. The results of the poor decisions made both by the United States foreign policy makers in the 1950s, and the Soviet Union's 1979-89 invasion and failed attempt to secure and stabilize the country has costs billions of dollars and thousands of lives leaving an unsure future for the region.

¹Peter Tomsen, *The Wars of Afghanistan* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), 34.

²Seth G. Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires America's war in Afghanistan* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010.), 7.

³CIA Factbook, Background

Examining the origins of the 1979 Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan, it is important to identify and analyze particular periods of time and significant events that led up to the invasion. The first period covers 1953-1963 during which Afghanistan was governed by King Mohammed Zahir Shah (1933-1973) alongside his cousin Prime Minister Mohammad Daoud (1953-1963). The next segment from 1963-1973 has been given the title "the constitutional decade" by Hassan Kakar as it shifts focus on the governing policies and reforms by King Shah who felt Afghanistan was ready to test its hand at democracy.⁴ This period lasted until 1973, when Mohammad Daoud shook the stability of the government and overthrew the constitutional monarchy in July 1973, establishing a republic and naming himself as president. Mohammad Daoud would be president until another coup in 1978 would remove him from power, establishing rule by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) with Nur Mohamad Taraki as the first communist president. After the 1978 coup, events would further unfold, destabilizing the government and taking it down a path of civil unrest. Afghanistan would face political and social unrest under the PDPA, leading to the 1979 Herat Uprising, death of its first president Nur Mohammad Taraki, Soviet's Operation Storm 333, and the Soviet's invasion in December 1979.

The Soviet invasion has been a subject of debate since 1979, considering that Afghanistan provided no major strategic advantage. Journalist Gregory Feifer argues that the decision to invade Afghanistan was not done in haste. The decision was deliberated by Kremlin leaders on several occasions during multiple meetings. Leonid Brezhnev, the Soviet leader (1964-1982), was initially opposed to sending the Soviet military to Afghanistan to assist the regime against civil unrest. The vast works of authors from 1979-2014 discuss and analyze the evolution and interpretation of the Soviet-Afghan War's initial years from 1979-1982. The domino of events allowed for the perfect storm and not one event single-handedly prompted invasion. While historians focus on the USSR foreign policy during the time, it is understandable as to why many believe that the Soviet involvement was unlike other Soviet interventions. Afghanistan was not officially a satellite country or part of the USSR, unlike Hungary and Poland. Afghani leadership facilitated and incorporated communism without Soviet Union's interference, although it has been argued that the KGB played a significant role by embedding agents in the Afghan government and society as early as the 1950s.⁵

King Mohammed Zahir Shah, the last king of Afghanistan (1933-1973) and his cousin, Mohammed Daoud Khan, Afghanistan's Prime Minister (1953-1963), governed Afghanistan from 1953-1963. Afghanistan was a neutral party within the Cold War framework and independent of Soviet-United States foreign policies until December 1955. During Mohammad Daoud's ten year tenure as Prime Minister, the country was on course to modernization and reform. Daoud's leadership style was authoritarian, and he was determined to modernize Afghanistan. He was very impatient with strong nationalistic views and insistent on pursuing the issue over Pashtunistan forcefully and seeking foreign aid by any means necessary.

⁴M. Hassan Kakar, *Afghanistan, The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response, 1979-1982* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University Press, 1995), 8-10.

⁵Tomsen, 92

The creation of Pakistan in 1947, after the British withdrew from the Indian subcontinent, raised several questions about the self-determination to an area known as Pashtunistan, which was now claimed by Pakistan. Afghanistan disputed the claim of this area, yet Pakistan was unwilling to acknowledge Afghanistan's complaint. This caused political strife between the two nations, with mediation efforts by outside nations gaining no headway.

The leadership of Pakistan, due to unstable internal rifts, would join the United States sponsored SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organization) and CENTO (Central Treaty Organization), leading to further cleavage between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Pakistani authorities discarded the Afghan claim over Pashtunistan completely. These agreements and treaties were part of the United States plan to contain Soviet expansionism, according to Kakar.⁶ The Americans provided Pakistan and Iran with military and economic aid, rejecting Afghanistan's concerns over the military buildup of its neighbors, who were still at odds with Pashtunistan.⁷

The Soviet Union's involvement began in 1954, when Prime Minister Daoud needed assistance to achieve his goals of modernization and reform. Daoud was determined to modernize his country quickly to finance a modern military that could stand up against Pakistan, build an economic development program, and establish a strong government.⁸ Daoud sent his younger brother, Prince Naim, to Washington to appeal for arms and assistance in 1954; however, The United States, not wishing to challenge Cold War ally Pakistan on the matter of Pashtunistan, refused aid. Payind argues the inexperience of Washington strategic planners did not take the local, national or regional disputes into consideration when they provided aid to Pakistan and sided with them to help. The political alignment to Pakistan made the nonaligned Afghanis frustrated and more concerned for its security, as Pakistan was using American-supplied arms against Afghanistan during border disputes.⁹

Both Kakar and Feifer mention the United States Secretary of State John Foster Dulles as a contributing factor in that he refused to allow Afghanistan to purchase military equipment. Dulles told Prime Minister Daoud to settle disputes with Pakistan first, despite being at increasing odds over Pashtunistan with tensions escalating between India and Pakistan on the Kashmir dispute.¹⁰ Dulles remarked, "After careful consideration, extending military aid to Afghanistan would create problems not offset by the strength it would generate."¹¹

While Dulles's refusal angered Prime Minister Daoud, it broke the confidentiality of the bilateral exchange, revealing his response to Pakistan's ambassador in Washington, which angered him more.¹² Daoud was forced to abandon hope for United States support, and in December 1955, he sought assistance from the Soviet Union, who happily accepted and provided aid. By January

⁶Kakar, 9

⁷Alam Payind, "Soviet-Afghan Relations from Cooperation to Occupation," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (February 1989), 110. (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/163642>)

⁸Kakar, 90

⁹Payind, 111

¹⁰Kakar, 9

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Tomsen, 90

1955, Daoud formally accepted a Soviet offer of \$100 million loan and adopted a “pro-Soviet” policy. Daoud thought that he could benefit from the Soviet Aid while at the same time limiting soviet espionage. The decision to accept advisors and Soviet economic and military support conflicted with the Musahiban generation that warned that the Soviets could not be trusted.¹³ The influence in Afghanistan began to shift to the Soviet Union, and Afghanistan increasingly depended on the Kremlin to provide support. In 1956, an additional \$32.4 million in military aid was accepted by Daoud from the Soviet Union orienting the armed forces to the Soviet Union.¹⁴ While Afghanistan made exponential progress in education, agriculture, health, public works, and military organization, it would later come at a price. The policies that Daoud implemented began to estrange conservative and nationalist rural Afghans, and the increased dependence of the Soviet Union did not fare well with King Zahir Shah and others. On March 10, 1963, the King would accept the resignation of Daoud in hopes to steer Afghanistan away from increasing Soviet influence.¹⁵

After the removal of Daoud, King Zahir Shah would assume a more prominent role in the government and improve relations with Pakistan and Iran in addition to moving the country to a democracy. He appointed a Tajik, Dr. Mohammed Yousuf, to be his first prime minister and an Uzbek, Abdul Sattar Sirat, to be his deputy prime minister. On October 1, 1964, the King signed a new constitution drafted by highly respected Pashtun and Tajik professionals, which included many of the traditional democratic principles and was based on the French constitutional model.¹⁶ The constitution incorporated several individual liberties to include equality before the law, free speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly and due process; additionally, it would maintain balance between Islam and the state. King Shah sought to reinstate balance between the West and the Soviet Union in addition to ending anti-Pakistan propaganda and eventually restoring trade routes with Pakistan.¹⁷ The King slowly restored Afghanistan neutrality between the superpowers, balancing Moscow meetings in 1965 and 1971 with Washington meetings in 1963. He began to distance himself from constantly siding with the Soviet Union and engaged with Chinese leadership by signing a border demarcation agreement and accepting aid from China. Moscow, as they had already invested millions of dollars into the country and believed themselves to be losing an investment, started to become very concerned that they were losing a valuable asset.

While the new government accomplished a great deal, one of the most important accomplishments allowed for security from government interference. This would make it possible for the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), along with other parties, to emerge.¹⁸ Tomsen mentions that Nur Mohammad Taraki was recruited by the KGB in 1951, and by 1956 would organize the first Marxist study group, given the name of his newspaper - Khalq (people).

¹³Ibid., 91

¹⁴Payind, 111

¹⁵Ibid., 113

¹⁶Tomsen, 98

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Kakar, 12

With the help of KGB agents, it was decided to create an Afghan communist party by combining Taraki's Khalq study group with Karmal's Parcham study group.¹⁹ The combination would form the PDPA; however, it only took eighteen months until the PDPA would break between two factions: Khalq (people) and Parcham (banner).

The Khalq and Parcham both claimed to represent the "true" PDPA.²⁰ The two factions were influenced by their backgrounds on ethnic, regional and social ideologies and behaviors. They were distinct, even with differing views on national policies, morality and behavior.²¹ The Parcham were primarily from well to do city groups that rose up in society, coming from landowning, bureaucratic, wealthy families. The Khalqis, on the other hand, found their way from poor rural groups. The majority of the Khalqis ethnic background was Pashtuns, whereas the Parchams were from urban ethnic minorities. The two factions were bound only through the education that they received from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on Marxist ideology. The two groups, despite having a short history in Afghan politics, were influential and detrimental to the future of Afghanistan.

The government under King Shah would come to an end by 1973. During 1969-1972, a three year drought consumed the lands and led to severe famine. The King was unable regain control over the government after he failed to act decisively and thousands lost their lives. This has been argued by David Gibbs as one of two destabilizing factors. It only made things worse since the Soviet Union was no longer providing economic aid and the demands of Vietnam lowered aid from the United States. The second was Daoud's new policies that reduced the ties it had with the Soviet Union, decreasing military advisors and also striving to form friendly relations with Pakistan after he took control of the government. Foreshadowing the events of the 1970s, in 1972, U.S. Ambassador Ronald E. Newmann would predict the King's democratic system would not last another year.²² He was right; Mohammad Daoud would seize the government in 1973.

On 16 July, 1973 Mohammad Daoud, with the assistance of Soviet KGB officers, Parcham leader Babrak Karmal, and communist Afghan military officers carried out a coup which overthrew the constitutional monarchy and declared Afghanistan a republic.²³ King Zahir Shah was in Europe for an eye operation on the night of the coup. Mohammad Daoud declared Afghanistan a republic and established himself as president, ending the forty-year reign of King Mohammed Zahir Shah.²⁴ With Daoud as president, the relationship between the Soviet Union and Afghanistan went well for the first two years, and Soviet Aid increased. In 1974, the Afghan government and the Soviet Union established a joint economic commission.

By 1975, Daoud had established his own party, the National Revolutionary Party.²⁵ He would begin to lower the dependency of Afghanistan on the Soviet Union and repair relations with

¹⁹Tomsen, 99

²⁰Kakar, 58

²¹Ibid.

²²Tomsen, 104

²³Ibid., 105

²⁴Gregory Fremont-Barnes, *The Soviet-Afghan War, 1979-89* (Great Britain: Osprey Publishing, 2012), 8-13.

²⁵Tomsen, 107

Pakistan, Iran and the United States. The Soviet Union was not thrilled over the emerging ties between the Islamic states and felt as though they were losing a grasp on the country they had invested billions of dollars on.²⁶ Daoud, by 1976, lowered the number of Soviet Military advisor from 1,000 to 200.²⁷ The Soviet Union found great displeasure in Daoud's new foreign policies and purging of the Parchamis. Later in 1976, the KGB set off to coerce the Khalq and Parcham to reunite.²⁸ The Afghan president was annoyed at the Soviet Union's ploy to unite the Khalq and Parcham, and at the same time he was purging the leftists from the officer corps of the military, of the Pro-Moscow PDPA.²⁹ During one of his last meetings with Moscow, Daoud intended to ask Brezhnev about the ploy and efforts by the Soviets to unite the two factions' PDPA. Daoud was instead lectured by the Soviet president on the methods of governance and why Afghanistan was employing outside experts from the United Nations, NATO, and other multilateral aid project. Brezhnev wanted the Afghan government to get rid of these experts and challenged Daoud's leadership and governing effectiveness. The result was Daoud's response: "We [Afghanistan] will never allow you to dictate to us how to run our country and whom to employ in Afghanistan. How and where we employ foreign experts will remain the exclusive prerogative of the Afghan state. Afghanistan shall remain poor, if necessary, but free in its acts and decisions." After the meeting, Soviet and Afghanistan relations, under Daoud, began to deteriorate.³⁰ Daoud's popularity began to decline in Afghanistan, especially after Moscow successfully encouraged the PDPA Khalq and Parcham factions to unite in 1977.³¹

In 1977, Islamic fundamentalist and leftists led a series of attacks and greatly disturbed the peace in Kabul. During an attack on 17 April 1978, Mir Akbar Khyber, a prominent Parcham confidant, would be assassinated by an unknown assailant. Mir Akbar Khyber was Daoud's interior minister, a prominent member of the PDPA, and a top communist activist.³² There is speculation that the regime, CIA, KGB, or Amin was behind the assassination; however, no evidence supports this.³³ The assassins were never caught. Babrak Karmal, a Tajik and leader of the Parcham faction of the PDPA, would later accuse Hafizullah Amin, a military liaison officer to the Khalq faction of the PDPA, and have two Khaliqis executed for the murder of Khyber.³⁴ The result of the assassination led to a funeral procession of over 10,000-15,000 demonstrators shouting anti-U.S. and anti-regime slogans and demanding justice.³⁵ During the funeral procession, Taraki, Karmal, and other PDPA's leaders denounced the government and spoke out,

²⁶Kakar, 14

²⁷Tomsen, 108

²⁸Ibid., 109

²⁹David Gibbs, "Does the USSR Have a 'Grand Strategy'? Reinterpreting the Invasion of Afghanistan," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (December 1987), 370 (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/424428>)

³⁰Kakar, 14

³¹Gregory Feifer, *The Great Gamble, The Soviet War in Afghanistan* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 23.

³²Fremont-Barnes, 31

³³Tomsen, 111

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid.

calling for the overthrow of Daoud.³⁶ The procession was in violation of the criminal code, as it was a demonstration of strength, causing the government to take action.³⁷ On 25 April 1978, Daoud set out to arrest and purge the rest of the PDPA leaders who sought to disrupt the government. The police detained seven members of the PDPA, including Nur Mohammad Taraki, the PDPA founder, who had spoken out at the funeral; this crackdown resulted in a stronger backlash. Hafizullah Amin, on the other hand, was not on the list of those detained, as he was not at the funeral procession at the time. The delay in Hafizullah Amin's arrest gave him time to draw up a plan with the help of Army and Air Force officers to overthrow the government. The coup was carried out on 27-28 April 1978. It is known as the April Revolution, or Saur Revolution, because of the Afghan lunar month of Sawr (Taurus).³⁸ In the early morning of 27 April, a few hundred communist junior officers led several armored units to surround the presidential palace. Major Watanjar, a Khalq, led a column of sixty tanks from the 4th Armored Brigade.³⁹ The Khalqi Air Force and Army seized the air base, allowing seven MiG-21's to launch sorties, along with helicopters, in support to Major Watanjar's tanks and shoot at the palace where Daoud was staying. While the army's seventh division was still loyal to Daoud and attempted to retake the city, their efforts were in vain and could not overcome the multiple air strikes and rebelling units.⁴⁰ The rebels, around 2 am on 28 April, launched an assault that would eventually seize the presidential palace. The assault left President Daoud and eighteen members of his family dead, in addition to around two thousand others.⁴¹ This would be the end of the dominance of the Durrani, who ruled since 1747.

The days following the coup, on April 30, military officers handed over power to a Revolutionary Council headed by Nur Mohammad Taraki.⁴² Taraki, a Khalq, was named president of Afghanistan on 1 May 1978, serving as president of the Revolutionary Council, prime minister, and general secretary of the PDPA.⁴³ Taraki established the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan by Decree No.1. Amin, a Khalq, would be appointed first deputy prime minister and foreign minister with Babrak Karmal, a Parchami, appointed as deputy premier. Tensions between the factions would flare up again, causing it to split and prompting Taraki to exile Karmal to Czechoslovakia.

There have been many different opinions on whether or not the Soviet Union was involved in the Coup against Daoud; however, no evidence can be found to substantiate these claims. It is believed that the Soviet Union supported Taraki's 1978 revolution against Daoud, as the Soviets were "unhappy with" and "disillusioned" with Daoud's path of governance and leadership, according to William Overholt. Alam Payind claims that as one insider, a KGB defector, reported

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Kakar, 14

³⁸Jones, 11.

³⁹Tomsen, 112

⁴⁰Feifer, 23

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Jones, 12

⁴³Kakar, 15

three years after the 1978 coup, “the Afghan communists consulted the Soviet embassy in Kabul and Moscow quickly confirmed that we [Moscow] would support their proposed coup against Daoud.”⁴⁴ Contrary to what has been presented by Overholt and Payind, Odd Arne Westad, in her article from *The International History Review*, “Prelude to Invasion: The Soviet Union and the Afghan Communists 1978-1979,” suggests that the Soviets were only involved after the event and had nothing to do with the planning or execution of the coup. She bases her research with the opening of the Moscow archives and fall of the Najibullah regime in 1992. Westad writes that the Soviet ambassador Aleksandr Mikhailovich Puzanov (1972-1979) was surprised by the successful coup by the PDPA.⁴⁵ Milton Goldman, along with Fremont Barnes, argues that there is no supporting evidence proving that the Soviet Union, not the KGB, supported, instigated, or engineered the president’s removal, nor did they know of any plans to do so.⁴⁶ Furthermore, Fremont-Barnes mentions that while the KGB appears to have possibly known about it, they were not excited about the idea. It is crucial to annotate and understand that the KGB and Moscow were not always on the same page.⁴⁷

Westad findings align with that of Feifer who contend that while the Kremlin had not even know or heard of the Journalist-activist Taraki or other Afghan politicians, many of the soviets applauded the revolution for “fostering the spread of communism.”⁴⁸ As David Gibbs writes, “the coup was devised at the last moment in response to Daoud’s crackdown,” and as concluded from research, the more logical scenario. He goes on to mention that the PDPA was “totally unprepared for the power that unexpectedly, even accidentally, fell into its hands.”⁴⁹

The PDPA came into power extremely unprepared, lacked economic programs, administrative experience, and even internal unity, and required a great deal of assistance from the Soviet Union. The PDPA was unable to function properly due to its division in parties, the Khalq and Parcham, which had only united officially after ten years of conflict by assistance with the Soviet Union, were unable to get along.⁵⁰ The Taraki Administration was set on transforming Afghanistan into a more modern, socialist, state and wanted to bring stability to the country and provide education to improve the people’s way of life. Taraki’s government and reforms are perfectly summed up by Fremont-Barnes presenting the radical reforms which instituted, via decree, wide ranging land reforms, to include the abolition of peasant debts to landowners as a major factor in the uprising that would occur throughout the country. While there was a drastic widening of women’s rights that included freedom of marriage, abolition of bride-price, and schooling for girls that was shown resistance by the rural community, it upset the conservative

⁴⁴Payind, 117-118

⁴⁵Odd Arne Westad, “Prelude to Invasion: The Soviet Union and the Afghan Communist, 1978-1979,” *The International History Review*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (February 1994), 49-69 (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40106851>)

⁴⁶Minton F Goldman, “Soviet Military Intervention in Afghanistan: Roots & Causes Polity,” *Palgrave Macmillan Journals* Vol. 16, No. 3 (Spring 1984), 384-403 (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3234556>)

⁴⁷Fremont-Barnes, 32

⁴⁸Feifer, 24

⁴⁹Gibbs, 371

⁵⁰Westad, 52

based populace that discouraged change and insisted it violated many Islamic codes. Promises were made for land reform, yet the Khalq went about it in horrifying authoritarian ways that included mass killings and executions, prompting uprisings and riots. Feifer argued that Taraki's reforms were just as, if not more than, ruthless as Daoud's.⁵¹ Losing control, Taraki and Amin were forced to seek more assistance from the Soviet Union to regain control of the people and government.⁵² The Soviets soon realized that the Saur Revolution and the powers of PDPA would become a liability to the Soviet Union. Payind acknowledged that the Taraki-Amin duo government grew increasingly more dependent on the Soviet Union for survival.⁵³ The Soviet leadership, Boris Ponomarev, attempted to warn Taraki that if he continued with these methods, the Soviet Union would no longer support his efforts. Taraki did not listen, as he believed the Soviets would never turn their backs on a fellow communist state. This confidence was because prior to the meeting, KGB Kryuchkov signed an Intelligence agreement with Kabul, and in December 1978, "the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighborliness, and Cooperation" was signed during a meeting with Taraki and Brezhnev.

By February 1979, the situation in Afghanistan grew worse and culminated in the Herat Uprising in March of 1979. This caused great concern for the Soviet Union and was "a cruel wake-up call," as it had caught the Kremlin off guard again.⁵⁴ On the 19th of March, when the rebellion was put down, Puzanov met with Taraki to convince him to change their policies, advising him to take steps "with the same energy as in the conduct of the armed struggle, to develop education and propaganda in order to attract the population to their side." This shows that the Soviets knew the reforms Taraki was forcing upon the people were not winning the hearts and minds of the Afghans.⁵⁵ The Herat uprising acted as a double-edged sword as it shed light on the failures of the PDPA regime, in addition to marking a significant shift in Soviet policy towards Afghanistan. The uprising produced the first large scale "slaughter of Soviet advisors and Soviet-backed government soldiers," according to Payind. By March 18, the Pravda was convinced and supported the DRA's claim that Iran was responsible in forcing the uprising by sending thousands of soldiers dressed as Afghans.⁵⁶ General Aleksey A. Yepishev and his team were sent to Afghanistan to assess the situation after the Herat uprising. Upon the conclusion of this visit, all military decisions would be made by the Soviet advisors.⁵⁷ Taraki requested several times during the rebellion that the Soviets send back up and support, "to save the revolution." The USSR no longer sought to seek out a successful PDPA revolution but became embedded in the domestic affairs to stabilize socialist transformation. The 1979 Herat Uprising was the first sign of a greater outside force of militant Afghan nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism. According to a March Politburo

⁵¹Feifer, 24

⁵²Gibbs, 371

⁵³Payind, 119

⁵⁴Vladislav Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War From Stalin to Gorbachev* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 260.

⁵⁵Westad, 57

⁵⁶Payind, 119

⁵⁷Ibid.

meeting, Gromyko has been declared as stating in transcripts, “In my opinion, we must proceed from a fundamental proposition in considering the question of aid to Afghanistan, namely: under no circumstances may we lose Afghanistan. For 60 years now we have lived with Afghanistan in peace and friendship. And if we lose Afghanistan now and it turns against the Soviet Union, this will result in a sharp setback to our foreign policy.”⁵⁸ The tides began to shift as to whether or not the Kremlin would support military intervention, “losing Afghanistan as a part of the Soviet sphere of influence would be unacceptable, geopolitically and ideologically.”⁵⁹ Gromyko is not mentioned by Payind with regards to the March Politburo meetings. Mention of these discussions and meetings regarding Soviet intervention only came about in later works from Zubok, Feifer, and Fremont-Barnes. Fremont-Barnes, for example, attests that while Taraki repeatedly requested soviet troops to maintain order, Kosygin met him in Moscow on 20 March to outline the Soviet’s position on internal affairs and refused direct military aid: “the intervention would worsen matters by inflaming opposition to the regime and arousing international condemnation suggesting there was no long term strategy to wage war in Afghanistan.”⁶⁰ This is important to understand, as the Soviet Union was between a “rock and hard” place with regards to the issues in Afghanistan. These same discussions are reported in Zubok’s book, in which he mentions that the next day, where the troika first advocated military intervention, it had changed to advocating non-military intervention. Both Andropov and Gromyko agreed that intervention was not the way to go, with Andropov stating, “We can uphold the revolution in Afghanistan only with the aid of our bayonets, and that is completely impermissible for us.” Gromyko makes mention of détente and how that was still important to the Soviet Union at the time, saying, “All that we have done in recent years with such effort in terms of détente of international relations, arms reduction, and much more—all that would be overthrown. China, of course, will receive a nice gift. All the nonaligned countries will be against us.” Additionally, reminding the Kremlin that intervention would lead to the cancellation of the summit with Carter. Feifer does not provide many details in this part, as he focuses on later events. This would all change seven months later in October 1979. By August 1979, the Soviet Union had mostly abandoned the idea of finding a political solution for Afghanistan and concluded that there was no viable alternative to the Taraki/Amin regime.⁶¹ Taraki’s government would not last very long due to his poor leadership and radical reforms. He took control of the government after the ousting of Daoud; however, he was just as easily ousted himself, this time by his own Prime Minister, Amin, who has been thought to be the mastermind behind the Saur Revolution.

By September 16, Amin staged a coup against President Taraki and completely overthrew him, ordering his death on October 9, 1979. This deeply offended the Soviet Union, particularly angering Brezhnev and proving to be a critical turning point in the Soviet decision-making process, which effectively pushed the Kremlin to invoke military action. By October, Amin had begun to

⁵⁸“Transcript of CPSU CC politburo Discussion on Afghanistan”, 17019 March 1979, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113260>

⁵⁹Zubok, 260

⁶⁰Fremont-Barnes, 35

⁶¹Gibbs, 374

distance himself from the Soviet Union by openly criticizing Moscow and attempting to build relations with Pakistan.⁶² By this time in 1979, stalemate with the United States had occurred and détente was a thing of the past, providing a good time for the Soviet Union to invade Afghanistan, as it no longer restrained Brezhnev's decisions due to détente.

The rationale behind the invasion was due to Brezhnev's emotional tie to Mohammed Taraki, and it was the principal cause for the invasion, which is argued by Feifer. Furthermore, Gregory Feifer is fairly correct in his assessment that "most Americans have viewed the Soviet invasion as a naked act of aggression by a ruthless, totalitarian state"; however, the Soviet decision to send troops to Afghanistan was far more complex.⁶³ This view has been shared by other historians such as Zubok, who presents that Brezhnev asked Andropov and Ustinov, "What kind of scum is this Amin—to strangle the man whom he participated in the revolution? Who is at the helm of the Afghan revolution? What will people say in other countries? Can one trust Brezhnev's words?"⁶⁴ Brezhnev was offended by Amin's actions because it was stated that Amin promised the Soviets he would do no such thing. Additionally, Feifer argues that Moscow blamed Amin, as a ruthless, inefficient leader, for many of the issues that the government faced. The Kremlin believed that the fall of the Iranian shah would cause Washington to expand its influence in Afghanistan, which was a concern to the security of its borders. Moscow was determined not to allow Afghanistan to fall, in part, because of the millions that were vested in it and its establishment of hegemony, and they believed that the proximity of the country would cause the Muslim population to spur anti-communist activities across its borders.⁶⁵ William Overholt argues that the accession of Hafizullah Amin threatened Soviet influence. He also states that "the emergence of a fundamentalist Muslim challenge to Amin's communist regime risked the whole network of Soviet gains and the humiliating defeat of a government which was not only supported by the Soviet Union but also actively assisted by thousands of Soviet Military and civilian Advisors."⁶⁶ What does not align with other historians is Overholt's statement that it [USSR] "sought to forestall the loss of previous soviet gains and move the Soviet Union closer to its 'historic goal' of a warm water port on the Indian Ocean." The decision to move into Afghanistan by the Soviet Politburo was only meant to be temporary and to defeat the mujahedeen (soldiers of god) in an effort to stabilize the government, not, as Overholt expresses, to obtain a warm water port. Furthermore, Overholt proclaims that it allowed access to the heart of the Indian subcontinent and to bases from which to influence events in Iran and "deter any US Military Intervention to free American hostages held in Teheran," another fallacy or so evidence today has presented itself. Minton Goldman states that the Soviets wanted to remove Amin from power, as they feared his lack of

⁶²Rodric Braithwaite, *Afgansty: The Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-1989* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 71, see Raymond L Garthoff, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1994, 1027.

⁶³Feifer, 2

⁶⁴Zubok, 262

⁶⁵Feifer, 3

⁶⁶William H Overholt, "The Geopolitics of the Afghan War Asian Affairs," Vol. 7, No. 4 Mar. - Apr., 1980), 205-217 (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/30171748>)

leadership and governance would move Afghanistan closer perhaps to the United States or to other Islamic countries, becoming anticommunist and anti-Soviet.⁶⁷

The Soviet Union changed its position and policy on Afghanistan after the killing of Taraki, according to Feifer and Kakar. Feifer presents that Defense Minister Ustinov was a prime advocate for military involvement and pushed for invasion at the December 12 meeting. It has also been presented that the Red Army's generals were primarily against military intervention. Gromyko, as indicated previously, spoke out against invasion until October, when he was being pressured from Ustinov and Andropov, who had changed his mind. Feifer, however, presents that it was Mikhail Suslov, another politburo member, who was the primary protagonist to invade on December 12, according to an interview with Leonid Shebarshin, a KGB Tehran station chief.⁶⁸

The invasion of Afghanistan as part of the Soviet Union's grand strategy of fusing Soviet national interests with that of left leaning states on a global scale and socialist expansionism was presented by Matthew Ouimet; however, there is a much broader reason and rationale as to why the USSR got involved, as has been indicated in previous statements. It is important to bring up "the Grand Strategy," which is presented by David Gibbs.⁶⁹ Although he does not advocate this ideology, David Gibbs mentions "the Grand Strategy School" in the first few paragraphs of his paper. He breaks this down into three categories in which this school of thought presented itself during that timeframe. First, The Soviet Union followed a policy of global expansion in the third world, of which Afghanistan was a part. Second, the Soviet Union was able to expand into Afghanistan and third world countries due to the United States' failures in Vietnam. Third, Soviet influence threatened the United States' security and its allies. Kennan has argued that the Soviet Union's foreign policy and strategy is and has been mostly defensive, seeking out to prevent hostile regimes on its borders, and that there is no indication of a global expansion strategy. It has also been argued that the USSR wanted control of Afghanistan to strengthen its footprint in the area amongst Pakistan and Iran, which were openly hostile towards Soviet policy. It is good to note that Feifer stated that at least according to one general staff officer, "no one ever actually ordered the invasion of Afghanistan."⁷⁰ While there are many arguments as to why the Soviet Union got involved with Afghanistan's government and why it invaded, many historians are still trying to determine a best-case scenario.

In conclusion, the invasion on December 27, 1979, was a result of mixed concerns and Soviet interests. The subsequent overthrow of Amin was key to the Soviet Union in preventing Afghanistan from posturing itself to be vulnerable to Islamic extremism and U.S. encroachment that would bring Western nations closer to USSR southern borders. The Soviet government saw drastic flaws in the leadership of Amin and set into motion a plan to replace the faction in power of the PDPA with the rival Parcham faction, which was most notably driven by KGB desires and

⁶⁷Goldman, 389

⁶⁸Feifer, 13

⁶⁹Matthew J Ouimet, *The Rise and Fall of the Brezhnev Doctrine in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003) Print.

⁷⁰Feifer, 59

informants. As previously stated by Feifer, the invasion of Afghanistan was not a decision made in haste, nor was it primarily driven by Soviet desires of expansionism, as Gibb's noted in the "Grand Strategy." It does bring into focus the realization that the primary reason for invasion was defensively oriented, as George F. Kennan states, and portray the leadership of the Soviet Union as being cautious and conservative. The political justification falls back to the "Brezhnev Doctrine," which carefully worded that "the Soviet view that if any of its client communist regimes is threatened, it has the right to intervene," giving it justification to aid the PDPA and squash the revolution in Afghanistan. In the end, the official death toll of the Soviet Union war in Afghanistan was about 15,000; however, it is believed to be much higher, upwards of about 75,000, which were cited by many veterans Feifer interviewed. Estimates have gauged the death toll of Afghans at 1.25 million, 9 percent of the country's population at the time. Today, the coalition of multiple nations is still in Afghanistan as well as the Middle East seeking ways to build and stabilize the government and assist in modernizing it. Only time will tell if the United States, along with over twenty other nations, is successful in this cause.