

IB History of the Americas HL

Internal Assessment

**Research Question: What were the origins of the Soviet invasion of
Afghanistan, ca. 1973-79?**

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Section A. Identification and Evaluation of Sources

This Internal Assessment addresses the following question: **What were the origins of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, ca. 1973-79?** Two sources will be evaluated (below) for origin, purpose, content, value, and limitations.

Source 1: Transcript of Politburo Discussions on Afghanistan, March 17 1979¹

In origin, Source 1 is a translated transcript of a March 1979 Soviet Politburo Meeting, a primary source chosen because it offers direct insights into perspectives of Soviet leaders. The Politburo was the highest decision-making body of the USSR, which included General Secretary Brezhnev and other high-ranking officials. As a transcript, the purpose of the document is to record a discussion of the Politburo meeting regarding Afghanistan, and its content presents the verbatim remarks of the Soviet leadership in the meeting. Its content shows the concerns of Soviet leadership prior to the invasion, especially regarding threats of an Islamist insurgency following the 1979 Iranian Revolution, as well as desires to protect a communist regime in Afghanistan. The discussions described instability of the Afghan government under Hafizullah Amin, and addressed whether military intervention was necessary to protect Soviet interests. This meeting was held in the months leading to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, so an important value of the transcript is that it reflects the immediate opinions and goals of the Soviet leadership. Another value is that this was a confidential document, so it likely presents honest discussion amongst Soviet leaders. Moreover, as a primary source, it enjoys the benefit of immediacy. One limitation of the source is that it only reflects Soviet thinking among top-level

¹ “Transcript of CPSU CC Politburo Discussions on Afghanistan,” TsKhSD, f. 89, per. 25, dok. 1, March 17, 1979, Il. 1, 12–25, via Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Cold War International History Project Virtual Archive

leaders, and does not reflect lower-level analysis from other Soviet diplomats or military officials. Another limitation of the source is that it does not reflect Afghan perspectives. Also, while the meeting appears to be important, it should be noted that this is only one discussion, only capturing the thoughts of Soviet leaders at one moment in time, without longer-term context.

Source 2: *Afghanistan: The Soviet Union's Last War* by Mark Galeotti (1995)²

In origin, Source 2 is the book *Afghanistan: The Soviet Union's Last War* by Mark Galeotti. This is a secondary source containing broad analysis of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The purpose of this book is to analyze the Soviet decision to invade Afghanistan and discuss its impacts on the USSR. I focused on the section "The War and Politics Impact." Its content includes analysis of a wide range of sources, including official Soviet documents and interviews with Soviet veterans who fought in the war. Moreover, the source's content includes evidence presented to challenge the view that the USSR invaded Afghanistan solely to protect a communist regime. Galeotti's book enjoys benefits of hindsight and newly available information released from Soviet archives. One limitation of Source 2 is that, as a broad treatment of origins, conduct, and effects of the war, it does not present the long-term history of Russo-Afghan relations, nor does it focus solely on Soviet decision-making.

² Galeotti, Mark. *Afghanistan: The Soviet Union's Last War*. Frank Cass, 1995.

Section B. Investigation

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 evoked international alarm and condemnation. While it is often viewed as an aggressive Soviet blunder, analysis of Soviet motivations shows that it was conceived as primarily a defensive move. Origins of the invasion date to the 1960s, when the USSR sought to expand its influence in Afghanistan. Soviet influence had played a significant role in Afghan politics since 1965 with the desire of ensuring a pro-Soviet regime was in power. However, this stirred conflict within the government and later the Afghan people. By late 1979, Islamist groups were revolting against the unpopular pro-Soviet Afghan government. While many viewed the Soviet invasion as an expansionist maneuver at the time, in hindsight evidence from Soviet archives shows it to be a defensive action. The USSR invaded Afghanistan to protect its geopolitical interests, support the Afghan communist government, and prevent an Islamic fundamentalist takeover that could destabilize Soviet Central Asia and undermine Soviet influence in the region.

Background

After gaining independence from Britain in 1919, Afghanistan remained neutral throughout the first half of the 20th century, although it did form close ties with the USSR in the early 1920s, which supplied Afghanistan with weapons and helped modernize its army.³ Mohammad Zahir Shah became the king of Afghanistan in 1933. Opposition to King Shah grew among the Afghan people when his government failed to implement numerous reforms it had promised.⁴ Soviet influence extended into Afghan politics in 1965, when Babrak Karmal and Nur Muhammad Taraki founded the communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA),

³ MISHRA, MANOJ KUMAR. "Afghan Neutrality: PRINCIPLES BREACHED AND COSTS INCURRED." *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2015, pp. 84–101

⁴ Dupree, Louis. *Afghanistan*. Princeton University Press, 1973.

which had strong ties to the USSR.⁵ The former Prime Minister under King Shah, Muhammad Daoud Khan, sought to take advantage of the unrest caused by failures of Shah's government and overthrew Shah in a coup d'état in 1973. Soviet KGB officers and the PDPA assisted Khan's coup.⁶

Afghanistan's Relations with Superpowers Under Daoud Khan (1973-1978)

Khan abolished the monarchy in 1973, making himself president of the Republic of Afghanistan. He was initially supported by the USSR.⁷ However, Khan intended to reduce Afghanistan's dependence on the USSR. He announced that Afghanistan would not align with either superpower, and he began to pursue diplomatic relations with anti-Soviet countries nearby in 1976, notably Iran and Pakistan, alarming the Soviets. Khan also reached out to the US to establish diplomatic relations.⁸ The Soviets feared that US-Afghan contacts could lead to US influence in Afghanistan that would prevent establishment of a pro-Soviet communist regime. The USSR wanted Khan removed in order to maintain Soviet influence in Afghanistan, and wanted a pro-Soviet regime that would extend Soviet influence in Asia.⁹

PDPA Coup and the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan

The USSR assisted the communist PDPA in assassinating Khan and overthrowing his regime in a coup in 1978.¹⁰ Taraki, Karmal, and Hafizullah Amin emerged as leaders of the new communist government, the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA). The USSR supported

⁵ Runion, M. L. *The History of Afghanistan*. Greenwood Press, 2007

⁶ Tomsen, Peter. *The Wars of Afghanistan: Messianic Terrorism, Tribal Conflicts, and the Failures of Great Powers*. PublicAffairs, 2013.

⁷ National Archives, RG 59, Central Foreign Policy File, D770077-0003. Confidential; Limdis.

⁸ Mukerjee, Dilip. "Afghanistan under Daud: Relations with Neighboring States." *Asian Survey*, vol. 15, no. 4, 1975, pp. 301-12

⁹ Goldman, Minton F. "Soviet Military Intervention in Afghanistan: Roots & Causes." *Polity*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1984, pp. 384-403

¹⁰ SHAHRANI, M. NAZIF, and ROBERT L. CANFIELD, editors. *Revolutions and Rebellions in Afghanistan: Anthropological Perspectives*. Indiana University Press, 2022.

the DRA, providing military and financial assistance.¹¹ Taraki became Prime Minister and introduced a modernization program, which also involved arresting Islamic fundamentalists and tribal and religious leaders. These unpopular policies led to civil unrest, and Islamist mujahideen revolts against the government began across Kabul. This caught the attention of the USSR, which was alarmed by the potential of this unrest growing into an Islamist revolution at its border.¹² This concern grew significantly after the establishment of an Islamist regime in Iran in February 1979.¹³

The Soviets feared the possibility of an Islamist regime coming to power in Afghanistan because it would weaken Soviet influence and could spread instability in its predominantly Muslim Central Asian Republics—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.¹⁴ To address this, the USSR summoned Taraki to Moscow in December 1978 to sign the Soviet-Afghan Friendship Treaty.¹⁵ This treaty bolstered relations between the two nations by promising economic and military cooperation, while also allowing direct Soviet military intervention against an Islamist insurgency in Afghanistan.¹⁶ However, tensions were already rising within Taraki's government. PDPA was divided into two factions, called the Khalq and the Parcham. Taraki and Amin had both risen to power on the Khalq platform, which advocated

¹¹ SHAHRANI, M. NAZIF, and ROBERT L. CANFIELD, editors. *Revolutions and Rebellions in Afghanistan: Anthropological Perspectives*. Indiana University Press, 2022.

¹² Hilali, A. Z., and A. Z. Hilali. "The US Response to the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan." *US-Pakistan Relationship: Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2005.

¹³ "Transcript of CPSU CC Politburo Discussions on Afghanistan," TsKhSD, f. 89, per. 25, dok. 1, March 17, 1979, II. 1, 12–25, via Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Cold War International History Project Virtual Archive

¹⁴ MISHRA, MANOJ KUMAR. "Afghan Neutrality: PRINCIPLES BREACHED AND COSTS INCURRED." *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2015, pp. 84–101

¹⁵ MISHRA, MANOJ KUMAR. "Afghan Neutrality: PRINCIPLES BREACHED AND COSTS INCURRED." *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2015, pp. 84–101

¹⁶ "The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the U.S. Response, 1978–1980." *U.S. Department of State*, U.S. Department of State,

radical social changes.¹⁷ By mid-1978, Taraki began pushing the more moderate Parcham faction out of power in the government. However, Taraki's primary concern in government was his rivalry over control of the Afghan army with Amin, who had risen to the position of Chairman of the Ministers' Council.¹⁸ The USSR wanted to keep Taraki in power, but he was assassinated by Amin in October 1979, who took his place as Afghan Prime Minister.

Social Unrest in Afghanistan and Soviet Concerns

In 1979, Afghanistan was in the midst of intense social and religious unrest due to dissatisfaction with the Afghan government. In order to prevent Islamist revolts, Prime Minister Amin wanted to pursue more moderate policies than Taraki had, particularly regarding religion, and attempted to convince Afghans that the communist government was not anti-Islamic. However, Amin's efforts to quell dissent among Afghans were unsuccessful, and the government began to lose control of rural areas to Islamist mujahideen forces, which alarmed the Soviets.¹⁹ Amin also wanted to reduce the government's dependence on the USSR, which was trying to maintain its influence by providing the Afghan military with weapons.

A translated transcript from a Soviet Politburo meeting in March 1979 reveals that Soviet leadership was hesitant to send troops into Afghanistan, but sought to maintain influence and ensure that the Afghan government remained communist, as an anti-Soviet Islamist government nearby would introduce security concerns for the USSR.²⁰ The USSR began working with Babrak Karmal, exiled leader of the Parcham faction, to undermine Amin in the government.

¹⁷ Kaufman, Michael T. "Taraki's Downfall Came Immediately after a Visit to Moscow." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 23 Sept. 1979

¹⁸ Misdag, Nabi. *Afghanistan Political Frailty and External Interference*. Routledge, 2006.

¹⁹ "Transcript of CPSU CC Politburo Discussions on Afghanistan," TsKhSD, f. 89, per. 25, dok. 1, March 17, 1979, II. 1, 12–25, via Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Cold War International History Project Virtual Archive

²⁰ Collins, Joseph. "Soviet Policy toward Afghanistan." *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science*, vol. 36, no. 4, 1987, pp. 198–210.

Moreover, the Soviet Foreign Minister, Defense Minister, and the Chairman of the KGB (Yuri Andropov) all pressed Soviet leader Brezhnev to launch a full-scale invasion of Afghanistan, arguing that an Islamist revolution would cause instability and trigger Islamist uprisings in Soviet Central Asia.²¹ The 1979 Islamist Iranian Revolution had contributed to these concerns, providing an example of an Islamist movement successfully overthrowing a government. As discussed in the March 1979 Politburo Meeting, Soviet leadership feared that the Iran Revolution could accelerate spread of Islamism to Soviet Central Asia, which could be further spurred by an Islamist Afghan state.²² Moreover, maintaining dominance over Afghanistan was a significant part of the USSR's Cold War strategy.²³ Afghanistan was an essential buffer between the USSR and pro-Western countries in South and West Asia, such as Pakistan, and the USSR wanted to ensure it kept Afghanistan within its sphere of influence. Furthermore, the USSR wanted to uphold the Brezhnev Doctrine, which had stated that any threat to a communist regime was a threat to all communist regimes.²⁴ The USSR ultimately invoked the Brezhnev Doctrine as political justification of the invasion.²⁵

Conclusion

While many observers at the time, including the Carter administration, viewed the Soviet invasion as an expansionist maneuver with the goal of expanding the Soviet sphere of influence, insights from Soviet archives, such as the 1979 Soviet Politburo meeting, provide evidence that it

²¹ Gompert, David C., et al. *Blinders, Blunders, and Wars: What America and China Can Learn*. RAND Corporation, 2014.

²² "Transcript of CPSU CC Politburo Discussions on Afghanistan," TsKhSD, f. 89, per. 25, dok. 1, March 17, 1979, II. 1, 12–25, via Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Cold War International History Project Virtual Archive

²³ Klimentov, Vassily A. 'In Search of Islamic Legitimacy: The USSR, the Afghan Communists and the Muslim World'. *Cold War History*, vol. 23, no. 2, Routledge, 2023, pp. 283–305

²⁴ Gompert, David C., et al. "The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan, 1979." *Blinders, Blunders, and Wars: What America and China Can Learn*, RAND Corporation, 2014, pp. 129–38

²⁵ "The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the U.S. Response, 1978–1980." *U.S. Department of State*, U.S. Department of State

was primarily a defensive move to secure Soviet borders against instability and Islamic fundamentalism.²⁶ Few historians at the time followed this interpretation of the invasion. George F. Kennan was one of such historians, stating that the invasion was the result of “defensive rather than offensive impulses” and that, as a bordering state, Afghanistan “represented a natural security concern for the Soviets.”²⁷ On the other hand, even after the collapse of the USSR, historians such as Michael Cox observed the invasion in the context of Cold War aggression, suggesting the invasion was caused by Soviet expansionist geopolitical ambitions in the region.²⁸

On December 29, 1979, the full-scale Soviet invasion of Afghanistan began. Thousands of Soviet troops entered the country, and the USSR was condemned by the international community. But, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was the result of years of internal conflict and regime changes within Afghanistan. Soviet geopolitical interests, mujahideen revolts against the unstable PDPA government, and growing Soviet fear of an Islamist uprising causing instability in Soviet Central Asia led the USSR to invade Afghanistan.

²⁶ “Transcript of CPSU CC Politburo Discussions on Afghanistan,” TsKhSD, f. 89, per. 25, dok. 1, March 17, 1979, II. 1, 12–25, via Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Cold War International History Project Virtual Archive

²⁷ Gibbs, David N. ‘Reassessing Soviet Motives for Invading Afghanistan: A Declassified History’. *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 38, no. 2, Routledge, 2006, pp. 239–263

²⁸ Cox, Michael. ‘The Empire’s Back in Town: Or America’s Imperial Temptation — Again’. *Millennium*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2003, pp. 1–27

Section C. Reflection

The intent of this investigation was to reconstruct the motivations and reasons behind the Soviet decision to invade Afghanistan. However, doing this decades after it occurred is an inherently difficult task. Moreover, decisions made by the Soviet government involved many people, organizations, and protocols that make it more challenging to pinpoint the exact decision-making process. This investigation emphasizes the importance of balancing perspectives. Many Western scholars at the time viewed the invasion as an expansionist move by the USSR. It ended *détente*, stopping the improvement of US-Soviet diplomatic relations, and led to a rise in Cold War tensions. On the other hand, the USSR itself saw it as a defensive maneuver to maintain stability within its sphere of influence. In order to present a balanced argument, both interpretations were addressed in the investigation. Additionally, while the Soviet decision to invade Afghanistan is often viewed in the immediate context of the Cold War, it can also be viewed in the long-term context of historical Russian imperial involvement in Afghanistan, dating back to the “Great Game” of the 19th century, where Russia and Britain competed for influence in the region.

Historical analysis also includes evaluation of a wide range of both primary and secondary sources such as government documents, treaties, speeches, and academic analyses. Historians face challenges in balancing evidence and arguments from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources may offer a limited perspective of events, but can provide valuable insight into the decision-making of important and influential figures or governments. It was difficult to find many primary Soviet sources during my investigation, likely due to the lack of Soviet records and certain documents being classified or unavailable online. Moreover, for the original Soviet sources I did use, I had to rely on translations from Russian. There were also few

primary Afghan sources available that were able to provide significant insight on possible Soviet motivations. I was able to use secondary sources to provide important background information and interpretations of primary sources leading up to the invasion.

The USSR's decision to invade Afghanistan in 1979 was the result of complex and multifaceted reasoning and several interconnected events. This exploration taught me how it is essential for historians to analyze diverse sources, balance conflicting perspectives, and critically evaluate evidence to develop a comprehensive understanding of historical events.

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