3. The Saur "Revolution" and the Soviet-Afghan War, 1978–1989

The relative stability of 1933 to 1978 gave way to insurrection, first against Afghan communists and later the invading Soviet Union. The communist coup and the Soviet invasion touched off 33 years of war that continues to the present.

In 1978, as President Daoud's regime approached its fifth year, he realized that the leftists had grown strong during his rule. He began to tack to the right, warming to the United States while relations with Moscow cooled. A demonstration after the mysterious death of an Afghan leftist alarmed Daoud, who put the leading members of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan under house arrest. The leaders of that party called for a coup. A relatively small band of leftist army officers, with some logistical help from Soviet advisors, attacked the palace, killing Daoud and his family. The Saur (April) Revolution, an urban coup d'état, marked the birth of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan.[1]

The PDPA was one party with two very different factions. The Khalq (Masses) faction, with great strength in the security services, was led by Nur Mohammad Taraki and Hafizullah Amin. A more moderate and broad-based group, the Parcham (Banner) faction, was led by Babrak Karmal. That party was soon pushed aside and its leader was sent abroad on ambassadorial duties. The leaders of the Khalq faction, Taraki and Amin were radical ideologues with a penchant for rapid modernization.

Their program—formed over Soviet objections—seemed almost designed to bring about an insurrection. Its main features were land reform, usury reform, and equal rights for women. All of these were unpopular. Land reform was particularly destabilizing. It was brutally applied and

was most unpopular among peasants, who saw it as immoral and inconsistent with Islam. On top of all of this, the PDPA changed the national flag's color from Islamic green to socialist red. Caught somewhat by surprise, Moscow was publicly enthusiastic about the prospects for the new regime but concerned that the PDPA was alienating the people. They urged the PDPA to go slow at every turn. Soviet theorists were privately scornful of a socialist revolution in what they viewed as a feudal state.

After the coup, PDPA relations with the United States were generally correct but not very productive. Washington was concerned about the regime and its open penetration by Soviet advisors but even more worried about developments in neighboring Iran. In February 1979, U.S.-Afghan relations nosedived when radicals in Kabul kidnapped U.S. Ambassador Adolph "Spike" Dubs. Against American advice, a sloppy, Afghan-led, Soviet-advised rescue attempt ended up killing the kidnappers and the Ambassador. U.S. aid programs ended and the diplomatic profile was reduced.

At the same time, Afghanistan's conscripted army was unstable and not up to dealing with emerging mujahideen (holy warriors). Tensions between Soviet advisors and Afghan commanders also grew. In March 1979, the insurgency took a drastic turn. A rebel attack against the city of Herat, coupled with an army mutiny, resulted in the massacre of 50 Soviet officers and their dependents. Patrick Garrity wrote in 1980:

> *Soviet advisors were hunted down by specially assigned insurgent assassination squads. . . . Westerners reportedly saw Russian women and children running for their lives from the area of the Soviet-built Herat Hotel. Those Russians that were caught were killed: some were flayed alive, others were beheaded and cut into pieces.*[2]

A leading figure in the attack on the Soviet advisors was then–Afghan army Captain Ismail Khan, who later became a resistance leader and then a regional warlord (who preferred the title emir), and thereafter a Karzai cabinet officer.

The Kremlin was quite concerned. After lengthy debate, however, Politburo principals rejected the use of the Soviet army. Yuri Andropov, a former KGB head and future Soviet leader, gave his reasoning against using Soviet troops: "We can suppress a revolution in Afghanistan only with the aid of our bayonets, and that is for us entirely inadmissible." Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko agreed and noted that other advances with the United States and Europe would be put in jeopardy by using force.[3]

The Afghan army conducted retaliation attacks in Herat, and Moscow beefed up its advisory efforts. Throughout 1979, Soviet advisors came to be found at nearly every echelon. Soviet pilots flew combat missions. A succession of Soviet generals conducted assessments that resulted in increases in advisors and equipment. Senior Soviet generals, however, were steadfast in their opposition to sending in a Soviet expeditionary force. They were keenly aware that this would inflame the situation and that their formations were tailored for conventional war on the plains of Europe, not for counterinsurgency in the Afghan mountains. The Soviet leadership agreed with this assessment until the fall of 1979.[4]

President Taraki visited Moscow in September 1979. He was told by the Soviet leadership that he had to moderate his program and that the major obstacle to change was his power hungry, radical prime minister, Hafizullah Amin. Taraki hatched a plot, but Amin learned of it and countered with one of his own. Shortly after a photo of Taraki embracing Brezhnev appeared on the front of *Pravda*, Taraki was killed by Amin's

henchmen. Amin then took the positions of defense secretary, prime minister, president, and general secretary of the party.

The Soviet Union's position of strength in Afghanistan was eroding, opening the Central Asian Republics to possible contagion from radical Islamists there. It appeared to Moscow that Washington might go to war to rescue its hostages in Iran. Hafizullah Amin had shamed the Soviet leadership, and the military situation was spiraling out of control. The Soviet leadership also believed that Amin had begun to reach out to the United States for help. Soviet-American relations were at a low point. Despite Gromyko's sentiments months before, there were no prospective political benefits from the United States—already angry at Soviet aggressiveness in the Third World—that would deter the Soviet Union from using the stick.

The debilitated Soviet leader, Leonid Brezhnev, and a group of fewer than a half dozen Politburo members decided that the situation had to be stabilized and then repaired. They ordered an invasion over the objections of the chief of the general staff.

A post-decisional Central Committee memorandum signed by Andropov, Gromyko, and others made the case for the invasion. It accused Amin of "murder," establishing a "personal dictatorship . . . smearing the Soviet Union," and making efforts "to mend relations with America . . . [by holding] a series of meetings with the American charge d'affaires in Kabul." They also accused Amin of attempting to reach "a compromise with leaders of the internal counter-revolution."[5] Based on these events and the perceived requirements of the Soviet-Afghan Friendship Treaty, the senior Politburo members wrote, "a decision has been made to send the necessary contingent of the Soviet army to Afghanistan." The intent of the Soviet military operation was to unseat Amin and his close associates, install the pliable Babrak Karmal as president, show the flag in the

countryside, and hold the cities and lines of communication until the Afghan security forces could be rebuilt. Soviet intentions proved the validity of the old folk wisdom: there's many a slip between the cup and the lip.

All of this came at the end of 1979, a time of great change in international relations. The Shah of Iran was overthrown and U.S. diplomats were later taken hostage by the radical regime in Tehran. Israel and Egypt signed the Camp David Accords, marking the high-water mark of U.S. influence in what had once been a Soviet ally. Islamist radicals seized the Grand Mosque in Mecca but failed to bring down the monarchy there. A Pakistani mob, misguided by rumors of U.S. involvement in the seizure of the mosque, burned the American Embassy in Islamabad. Finally, the December invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union added great stress to superpower relations. It was the first time the Soviet Union used its own forces to attack a nation outside the Warsaw Pact. This drastic violation of Cold War expectations resulted in a proxy war between the superpowers.[6]

The Soviet invasion in late December 1979 was a well-executed operation. Previously infiltrated commandos moved on the palace and killed Amin and his entourage. Paratroopers seized bases in and around the capital. Two motorized rifle divisions filled with reservists from the Central Asia Republics—one from Termez in the north central region and one from Kushka, Turkmenistan, in the west—brought the number of Soviet troops to 50,000 by the end of the first week of January 1980. Over time, the reservists would be withdrawn and the Soviet force increased to 130,000.[7]

Karmal was not successful in unifying the government. Afghan army forces that did not desert continued to perform poorly, just as the resistance—energized by the invasion—moved into high gear. Soviet forces

were not trained for counterinsurgency and, lacking recent experience in mountain warfare, did not perform well in the Afghan environment. Later, the Soviets would move in large-scale operations to clear areas of strong mujahideen elements. They rarely held areas in the countryside and never tried to govern them systematically. They did not see their mission as protecting the population, nor did they exercise great care regarding civilian casualties and collateral damage. Afghan refugees increased, along with international outrage.

Soviet military efforts were hampered by slow learning within the Soviet armed forces. It would take 5 years before they began agile strike operations with air assault and airborne forces. A second problem was international isolation and significant support for the insurgents. The invasion of Afghanistan was a heinous act, and even East European and Cuban communists were slow to help. China and the United States kept up a drumbeat of criticism. Washington instituted a grain embargo and boycotted the Moscow Olympics. Moreover, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United States, usually working through Pakistani intelligence, came to the aid of the mujahideen, who maintained sanctuaries in Pakistan. During the second Reagan administration, the mujahideen were provided with shoulder-fired antiaircraft missiles, which took a serious toll on Soviet aircraft. At its height, U.S. aid to the mujahideen, nearly all distributed by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) directorate, rose to $400 million per year.[8]

The deck was stacked against the Soviet military effort. As an avowedly atheist foreign power, it had allied itself with a hated regime completely out of step with the Afghan people. The government had little legitimacy. The military tasks were daunting and the Karmal government had little international support outside the Soviet Union. It had too few soldiers to

control the countryside, so they limited themselves to sweeps or clearing operations. The enemy had a secure sanctuary and great amounts of international support. A contemporary account noted that:

> *To date, Soviet strategy appears to have been to hold the major centers of communications, limit infiltration, and destroy local strongholds at minimum costs to their own forces. In essence, the Soviet strategy* [was] *one wherein high technology, superior tactical mobility, and firepower are used to make up for an insufficient number of troops and to hold Soviet casualties to a minimum. In effect, Soviet policy seems to be a combination of scorched earth and migratory genocide.*[9]

A new age dawned in the Soviet Union in 1985. Mikhail Gorbachev, a Communist reformer, became general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and leader of the tottering Soviet regime, which had buried three of its previous rulers in as many years. A dedicated communist, he set out to unleash his program of new thinking, democratization, openness, and restructuring on a Soviet Union that found it to be very strong medicine. The war in Afghanistan fit Gorbachev's transformational agenda, to borrow Stalin's phrase, "like a saddle fits a cow."

The Soviet Union moved quickly to shore up Afghan leadership. In 1986, the increasingly ineffective Karmal was relieved, and the young and dynamic Najibullah—a one-time medical student and the former head of the Secret Police—was put in his place. While Najibullah tried to remove the communist taint from his government, he rebuilt the army, changed the name of the governing party, and formed alliances with

local militias. He was not a man of scruples, but he was clever and got things done.

Gorbachev apparently gave the Soviet army a year to fight on in Afghanistan, provided extra resources, and encouraged its experimentation. The USSR pushed the reform of the Afghan army, and the Soviet advisors and Najibullah's cadres were quite successful in their last few years at building the Afghan army and organizing friendly militia groups.

With the stalemate continuing, Gorbachev proceeded to negotiate first a withdrawal of Soviet forces, which was completed in February 1989, and then—along with his successors—an ineffective bilateral cutoff of military aid to all combatants. Most people thought those actions would soon bring an end to the war. They were wrong. Najibullah was able to continue fighting for 3 years after the Soviet departure. His regime, however, vanished shortly after the Soviet Union disappeared as a state. Najibullah left the field in 1992 but was unable to escape. The civil war continued after Najibullah's departure, first among the so-called Peshawar Seven groups[10] and then between those groups and the Taliban.

Before moving to the civil war and beyond, it is important to deal with a common misperception. Some pundits, both American and Russian, see the United States today in the same boat in Afghanistan as the USSR was in the 1980s, a second superpower bogged down in the "graveyard of empires" and destined to meet the same fate.[11] This label overestimates the effects of defeats on Great Britain and the Soviet Union. While the "graveyard of empires" is an important warning, it should not be taken as a literal prediction for the United States and its coalition partners.[12] There are many surface parallels and potential lessons, but the Soviet and American policy and operations in Afghanistan were essentially different.[13]

The United States is a superpower, but it is not an empire. It does not need to occupy countries or replicate American governmental structures or political ideology to accomplish its long-term goals. In Afghanistan, after having been attacked by resident terrorists, the United States came to the aid of combatants fighting an unpopular government recognized by only three countries. American forces did not kill any U.S. allies and replace them with puppets during the invasion. The Soviets forced over four million Afghans into exile, while the United States created conditions where the vast majority of them have returned.

In one sense, both Washington and Moscow were unprepared for a protracted insurgency in Afghanistan. The Soviet Union, however, fought with punishing fury in the countryside. War crimes and illegal punitive operations were daily occurrences. There was no talk about protecting the population; Soviet operations were all about protecting the regime and furthering Soviet control. Today, the United States has in large measure adapted to the insurgency and is working hard to protect the people, who are being besieged by the lawless Taliban, itself a purveyor of war crimes and human rights violations.

The Soviet army's enemy in Afghanistan was the whole nation; the United States and its coalition partners—49 of them in 2010—are fighting an extremist religious minority group of no more than 25,000 to 35,000 fighters whose national popularity rarely rises above 10 percent.[14] Finally, the Soviet Union fought to secure an authoritarian state with an alien ideology, while the United States and its allies are trying to build a stable state with democratic aspirations where people have basic freedoms and a claim on prosperity. Even in its beleaguered condition, the Karzai regime—twice elected nationwide—has far more

legitimacy than the Afghan communists ever did. Beyond the locale, the importance of sanctuaries, and the great power status of the United States and the Soviet Union, there are not a lot of similarities between Moscow's conflict and the war being fought by the United States and its coalition partners.

In the end, the Soviet experience in Afghanistan cost 15,000 Soviet and a million Afghan lives, created a huge Afghan diaspora, left tens of millions of mines on the ground, and hastened the demise of the Soviet Union. Sadly, it did not create a better peace. In fact, it did not create any peace. After the departure of the Soviet Union in 1989, a civil war would continue to the start of the next century, first against the Najibullah regime, then among the mujahideen groups, and then between those groups and the upstart Taliban. After the Taliban seized Kabul in the fall of 1996, it continued to fight the non-Pashtun mujahideen, who reorganized as the Northern Alliance.