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## The April “Revolution” and the Soviet-Afghan War: Why neither is a Good Analog to Today’s War in Afghanistan

by Joseph Collins

The relative stability of 1933 to 1978 gave way to insurrection first against Afghan communists, and later, the invading Soviet Union. The communist coup (April 1978) and the Soviet invasion (December 1979) touched off a period of 33 years of war that continues up to the present. If we review the basics, however, the Soviet experience is not a good analog for U.S. and NATO operations.

In 1978, as President Daoud’s regime approached its fifth year, he realized that 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 (PDPA) 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 advisers, attacked the palace. Daoud and his family were killed. The Saur (April) Revolution, an urban coup d’etat, marked the birth of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup>

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

Their program --- over Soviet objections --- seemed almost to be designed to bring about an insurrection. Its main features were land reform, usury reform, and equal rights for women. All of these were very unpopular. Land reform was particularly destabilizing. It was brutally applied, and most unpopular among peasants who saw it as immoral and un-Islamic. 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 Afghan people. At every turn, they urged the PDPA to go slow. Soviet theorists were privately scornful of a socialist revolution in what they viewed as a feudal state.

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<sup>1</sup> For an eyewitness analysis of the coup, see Louis Dupree, “Red Flag over the Hindu Kush, Part II: The Accidental Coup or Taraki in Blunderland,” *American Universities Field Staff Review*, no. 45, September 1979.

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

At the same time, Afghanistan's draft Army was unstable and not up to dealing with emerging *mujahidin* (holy warriors). Tensions between Soviet advisers 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 a massacre of 50 Soviet officers and their dependents. Patrick Garrity wrote in 1980:

Soviet advisers 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 ...<sup>2</sup>

A leading figure in the attack on the Soviet advisors was then-Afghan Army Captain Ismail Khan, who later became a resistance leader, 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 there. Yuri V. Andropov, a future Soviet leader said at the time that he was 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 Gromyko agreed and noted that other advances with the United States and Europe would be put in jeopardy by using force.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to retaliatory attacks, the Soviet Union beefed up its advisory efforts. Throughout 1979, Soviet advisers came to be found at nearly every echelon. Soviet pilots flew close air support missions. A succession of Soviet generals conducted assessments that resulted in increases in advisors and equipment. Senior Soviet Generals 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 mountains. The Soviet leadership apparently agreed with this assessment until the Fall of 1979.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Patrick Garrity, "The Soviet Military Stake in Afghanistan: 1956-79," *RUSI: Journal of the Royal United Services Institute* (September 1980), p. 33.

<sup>3</sup> Working Transcript of the Meeting of the Politburo, *Re: Deterioration of the Conditions In DRA and Possible Responses from Our Side*, March 17, 1979. This document can be found in the Storage Center for Contemporary Documentation, Moscow, *Fond 89, Perechen 25, Dokument 1*. The English translation was done under the auspices of the Norwegian Nobel Institute for their 1995 Nobel Symposium, Oslo, Norway, September 1995.

<sup>4</sup> For an excellent summary of Soviet decision-making on the invasion based largely on declassified documents, see Diego Cordovez and Selig Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 35-49.

In September 1979, President Taraki visited Moscow. 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 had appeared on the front page of *Pravda*, Taraki was killed by Amin, who 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 its Central Asian republics to possible contagion from radical Islamists there. It appeared to them that the United States might go to war in Iran to rescue its hostages. Hafizullah Amin had shamed the Soviet leadership, and the military situation was spiraling out of control. They also believed that Amin had begun to reach out to the United States for help. Soviet-American relations were at a low point. By the fall of 1979, there were no longer any prospective benefits from an increasingly anxious 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 small group of less 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, et al. made the case for the invasion. It accused Amin of "murder," establishing a "personal dictatorship ... smearing the Soviet Union," and taking 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."<sup>5</sup> 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 bit of 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 later, U.S. diplomats were taken hostage by the new 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 Grand Mosque --- burned the US embassy in Islamabad. Finally, the December invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union added great stress to Superpower relations. It was the first time that the Soviet Union had used its own forces

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<sup>5</sup> Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CC CPSU) Memorandum, *Subject: Regarding Events in Afghanistan during 27-28 December 1979*, number 2519-A, dated December 31, 1979, p. 1. This document can be found in the Storage Center for Contemporary Documentation, Moscow, *Fond 89, Perechen 42, Dokument 10*. The English translation here was done under the auspices of the Norwegian Nobel Institute for their 1995 Nobel Symposium, Oslo, Norway, September 1995.

to attack a nation outside the Warsaw Pact. This drastic violation of the Cold War expectations resulted in a proxy war between the Superpowers.<sup>6</sup>

### *Soviet Military Operations*

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. Soviet paratroopers seized major 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 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 over time to 130,000.<sup>7</sup>

Karmal was not successful in unifying the government. Afghan soldiers, who 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, Soviet forces would move in large-scale operations to clear areas of strong *mujahidin* elements. They rarely held areas in the countryside and never tried to govern them systematically. They did not see their mission as one of protecting the population, nor did they exercise much care in the area of civilian casualties or 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 five 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. The United States instituted a grain embargo and boycotted the Moscow Olympics. Third, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United States --- usually working through Pakistani intelligence --- came to the aid of the *mujahidin*, who maintained sanctuaries in Pakistan. During the second Reagan Administration, the *mujahidin* were provided with shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles which took a serious toll on Soviet aircraft. At its height, U.S. aid to the *mujahidin* --- nearly all distributed by Pakistani ISI --- rose to \$400 million per year.<sup>8</sup>

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 its own people. The government had no legitimacy. The military tasks were daunting and the Karmal government had little international support outside the Soviet Union. They had too few soldiers to control the

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<sup>6</sup> On the salience of the year 1979, see Dan Caldwell, *Vortex of Conflict: U.S. Policy Toward Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Some sources put the highest Soviet troop strength at 115,000. On invasion and subsequent fighting, see Joseph Collins, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan* (Lexington Books, 1986), pp. 77-164; Henry Bradsher, *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1983), pp.169-239; and on Soviet tactics, Lester Grau, ed., *The Bear Went over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1995); and on *mujahidin* tactics, Ali Ahmad Jalali and Lester Grau, *The Other Side of the Mountain: Mujahidin Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War* (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Combat Development Command, 1998)

<sup>8</sup> Bruce Reidel, *Deadly Embrace: Pakistan, America, and the Future of the Global Jihad* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2011), p. 27.

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.<sup>9</sup>

In 1985, a new age dawned in the Soviet Union. 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 ---- put in his place. Najibullah tried to remove the communist taint from his government, 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 Red 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 advisers 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 that those actions would soon bring an end to the war. They were wrong. Najibullah was able to continue fighting for three years after the Soviet departure. His regime, however, disappeared shortly after the Soviet Union disappeared as a state. Najibullah left the field in 1992, but was unable to escape. Four years later, he would be tortured and killed by the newly triumphant Taliban. The civil war continued after Najibullah left, first among the so-called Peshawar Seven groups,<sup>10</sup> and then between them and the Taliban.

Before leaving this subject, it is important to deal with a misperception that one often hears. Some pundits --- both American and Russian --- see the United States today in the same boat that the USSR was in Afghanistan in the 1980s, two superpowers bogged down in the "graveyard of empires," destined to meet the same fate.<sup>11</sup> This actually overestimates the effects

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<sup>9</sup> Joseph Collins, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, p. 145.

<sup>10</sup> For a précis of all of the Peshawar Seven groups, see Larry Goodson, *Afghanistan's Endless War: State Failure, Regional Politics, and the Rise of the Taliban* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2001), pp. 189-93.

<sup>11</sup> See, for an example, Artemy Kalinovsky, "Afghanistan is the New Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy*, September 2009 at [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/09/04/afghanistan\\_is\\_the\\_new\\_afghanistan](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/09/04/afghanistan_is_the_new_afghanistan)

of defeats in Afghanistan 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.<sup>12</sup> There are many surface parallels and potential lessons, but the essence of the Soviet and American policy and operations in Afghanistan were very different.<sup>13</sup>

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 in the world. We did not kill any of our allies and replace them with puppets during the invasion. The Soviets forced five million Afghans into exile, while the United States created conditions where the vast majority of them have returned.

In one sense, both the United States and the Soviet Union 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 in Afghanistan. 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 Union’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 25-30,000 adherents whose national popularity rarely rises above 10 percent.<sup>14</sup> 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. In its beleaguered state, the Karzai regime has much more legitimacy than the Afghan communists ever did. Beyond the locale of the conflict, 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 the Soviet Union’s conflict and the war being fought by the United States and its 49 coalition partners in Afghanistan.

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 in Afghanistan, and hastened the end of the Soviet Union. Sadly, it did not create a better peace. In

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<sup>12</sup> Two excellent books about contemporary war in Afghanistan use “graveyard of empires” in their titles. David Isby, *Afghanistan, Graveyard of Empires: A New History of the Borderlands* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2010); and Seth Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America’s War in Afghanistan* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> There are also articles trumpeting the Vietnam-Afghanistan parallel. For one example, see Tom Johnson and M. Chris Mason, “Saigon 2009,” *Foreign Policy*, August 20, 2009, at [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/08/20/saigon\\_2009](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/08/20/saigon_2009). The Vietnam analogy does not carry water when the scope and scale of the conflict are taken into account. Another anomalous item in that comparison is the salience of Soviet and Chinese security assistance and the existence of a massive and highly professional North Vietnamese Army. This modern, mechanized army was the final instrument of defeat for the South Vietnamese government, not indigenous South Vietnamese guerrillas. There is no such factor in the current conflict in Afghanistan.

<sup>14</sup> Brookings, *Afghanistan Index*, October 2010, Figure 4.12 shows Taliban approval ratings totaling 10 percent. See <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/Programs/FP/afghanistan%20index/index.pdf>. The strength of today’s Taliban is the author’s estimate, based on conversations with various intelligence analysts. On current Taliban troop strength, see the Associated Press story: Slobodan Lekic, “Taliban Numbers Unaffected by Allied Troop Surge,” *Boston Globe*, January 7, 2010 at [http://www.boston.com/news/world/europe/articles/2011/01/07/taliban\\_numbers\\_unaffected\\_by\\_allied\\_troop\\_surge/](http://www.boston.com/news/world/europe/articles/2011/01/07/taliban_numbers_unaffected_by_allied_troop_surge/).

fact, it did not create a peace at all. 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 *mujahidin* groups, then between those groups and the upstart Taliban. After the Taliban seized Kabul in the fall of 1996, the Taliban and the non-Pashtun *mujahidin*, reorganized as the Northern Alliance, continued to fight. Five years later, after the 9/11 attacks, the United States and its allies came to the aid of that alliance in pursuit of its attackers and their accomplices.

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