LEARNING FROM HISTORY:
THE SOVIET EXPERIENCE IN AFGHANISTAN

Knowledge Through Understanding Cultures
TRIBAL ANALYSIS CENTER

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NEXT PAGE

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The Soviet Experience In Afghanistan

As it was in the bitter years before,
So it shall be in the oversweetened hour –
That a man's mind is wont to tell him more
Than Seven Watchmen sitting in a tower.

– Kipling[1]

Instead of reading history and learning from the military solutions attempted by others under similar circumstances, the unprepared often reach back to repeat solutions with which they experienced previous successes in comparable situations. In the case of the Soviet decision to intervene in Afghanistan, Yuri Andropov was a key player who nearly fell into this particular trap because of his previous operational success in Hungary and Czechoslovakia under circumstances that were similar to the problems being experienced in Afghanistan in 1979.

Borders were a sensitive issue for the Soviets with the memories of Hitler's highly mobile Wehrmacht divisions streaming toward Moscow still fresh in their minds. Because of this recent history, buffer states were retained along borders with Eastern Europe and early positive relationships with the People's Republic of China left the Soviet Union's leaders relatively comfortable. Only to the south did potential threats arise in the form of Iran and Afghanistan, but both nations were far too weak militarily and remained generally unaligned. But world events failed to continue to break the way the Soviets desired.

Egypt's Anwar Sadat was the first to view a close relationship with USSR as a liability[2], and within a few years, Somalia's Siad Barre also rejected the Soviets[3]. Meanwhile, the United States stepped in with large aid programs for both countries that the Soviets could not match, and the strategic allegiance in both Egypt and Somalia shifted towards the West to sensitize the Soviets to the reality that the Brezhnev Doctrine[4] was actually far more reversible than they declared. Additional trouble was also brewing just along their worrisome southern border.

1. *The Literary Digest*, Volume 61, Issues 1517-1523, pg. 34.
2. http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1129&dat=19720720&id=kOENAAAAIBAJ&sjid=C20DAAAAIBAJ&pg=7006,2557242 accessed 27 March 2010.
3. http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2863.htm accessed 27 March 2010.
4. http://europeanhistory.about.com/od/glossary/g/glbrezhnevdoct.htm accessed 27 March 2010.

While Iran had been a quiet neighbor for decades, the last year of the 1970's decade would have a profound impact on the Soviet leadership's views of their southern border that had been stable for so many years. The inept blundering of President Carter removed the gradually modernizing Shah and allowed Ayatollah Khomeini[5] and his radical followers to create the world's first Islamic fundamentalist state out of previously pro-Western Iran. For the first time in decades, a potentially hostile nation capable of conducting destabilizing operations had appeared on the Soviet Union's border.

The Soviet Union's leaders took some comfort in the Afghanistan's 1978 communist revolution, but the repression of the rural peasantry and their tribal and religious leaders by the new leadership in Kabul spawned an Islamic fundamentalist insurrection in rural Afghanistan. Within a year, the new communist government was responding to the rural rebellion with considerable savagery, creating anger and hatred that led to the insurgency spreading even further. The new communist leader of Afghanistan, poet-revolutionary Muhammad Taraki[6], who had been imprisoned by the government, was soon requesting Soviet help in putting down the rebellion he had managed to create.

As the Soviet ambassador to Hungary during the 1956 revolution, Andropov[7] played a key role in convincing a reluctant Nikita Khrushchev that military intervention was required to stabilize the situation. Again in 1968, he was instrumental in ensuring that the Czechoslovakian reform movement was brutally suppressed with military force[8] and given his experiences in two previous threats to Soviet dominance within their sphere of influence, it isn't surprising to discover that Andropov was a leading advocate for the use of military force to resolve the growing crisis in Afghanistan.[9]

But these experiences were entirely dissimilar to the problem of confronting nationalistic Muslim fundamentalists inside a Central Asian country with supportive neighbors, primarily Pakistan, and to a lesser, but very significant aid from both China and revolutionary Iran. The United States government, still under the completely naïve Jimmy Carter, who was soon pathetically announcing, "In the last month, I have learned more about the Soviet Union than in the last two and a half years," soon after Soviet Special Forces attacked the Tajbeg Palace[10] near Kabul to remove Hafizullah Amin, a man they believed to be a CIA agent to replace him with Babrak Karmal, a KGB agent.[11]

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 was viewed in the United States as an opportunistic move in the wake of the American withdrawal from nearby Iran and the growing hostage crisis in Tehran that left the Carter administration looking both incompetent and unable to stop the communist military move. Conventional wisdom and media reporting argued that the Soviets were making a long-desired geopolitical move toward the "warm water ports" they desired for generations. Selig Harrison wrote *In Afghanistan's Shadow: Baluch Nationalism and Soviet Temptations* in 1981 to reinforce this concept as the United States worked from weakness in fear that the Soviets were making a move to actually win the Cold War through surrogates. Communist Vietnamese invaded Cambodia a year before and Communist-inspired insurgencies were underway in El Salvador, Nicaragua, Colombia, and Soviet surrogates were involved in wars in Angola, Mozambique, Ethiopia, and elsewhere to reinforce the fears in the West.

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5. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ruhollah_Khomeini accessed 27 March 2010.
6. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nur_Muhammad_Taraki accessed 27 March 2010.
7. http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=va2.document&identifier=82699F97-EC4B-54BD-C4D29366EA294161&sort=Collection&item=The%20Warsaw%20Pact accessed 27 March 2010.
8. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Warsaw_Pact_invasion_of_Czechoslovakia accessed 27 March 2010.
9. http://wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=va2.document&identifier=5034DB5A-96B6-175C-9D886C24443BD2D4&sort=Collection&item=The%20Cold%20War%20in%20the%20Middle%20East accessed 27 March 2010.
10. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tajbeg_Palace accessed 02 April 2010.
11. See Arbel, David and Edelist, Ran, *Western Intelligence and the Collapse of the Soviet Union: 1980-1990: Ten Years that did not Shake the World*, London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2003, p. 44 for details.

A 1984 paper revealed some basic misunderstanding and erroneous assumptions made during the Cold War. Then, as now, the military industrial complex was a large player in ensuring that the worst-case scenario would be the basis for national security decision-making. During the Cold War, this resulted in the US view that the Russians were an aggressive power that needed to be feared. A far more rational and less alarmist view was presented in this paper by George F. Kennan[12], a man who carefully read history before attempting to make it.

In his paper, Kennan carefully explained that the Soviets were far less likely to intervene militarily in the contested Third World than was the United States. Since their violent 1917 Revolution brought them to power in Russia, the Soviets were far more aggressive with their propaganda than they ever were with their military power. They were clearly opportunistic and took advantage of every chance to use subversion and their deniable surrogate forces, but sending the huge Red Army across international borders was not their *modus operandi*. Armed reactions occurred, obviously, in East Germany, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia when Soviet garrisons were used to quell secessionist movements that would result in gaps in the buffer states the Soviet leaders wanted to maintain around their borders, but they had not resorted to the use of armed intervention outside of their limited sphere of influence immediately adjacent to their borders.

Kennan argued that the Soviet Union was reluctant to use military force to solve political problems and this is well-documented in declassified Politburo transcripts[13] related to their decision to intervene in Afghanistan's developing civil war. But the Soviets did intervene in Afghanistan after nearly two years of agonizing over the decision and in the end, essentially four individuals managed to convince Brezhnev to invade. This begs the question: Why did the Soviets invade if this was not a part of some Grand Strategy?

Great powers are generally slow to move militarily because of problems related to "unintended consequences." And once a military option is in motion, bureaucratic politics and internal competition among contending elites make it next to impossible to reverse a decision to use force without facing a loss of personal prestige that could result in the loss of personal power. The Soviets were facing multiple challenges during this period and they moved into Afghanistan out of fear, not out of strength. Fear is the one factor that will get a great power to utilize the military instrument of force.

Soviet fears were difficult to assess from the United States perspective, but these were real to the old men running the Kremlin at this period in Russian history. Their presence on the world stage was relatively new and they were generally inexperienced in dealing with events such as the one that was under consideration. For example, the last democratic leader of Russia in the chaos of 1917, Alexander Kerensky, was still alive and living in New York City in 1970[14], not long before they were making the difficult decision to invade the first country in their history. And like most leaders about to make history, they failed to read any of it before committing troops to the Afghanistan intervention. Even a cursory reading of Afghanistan's history would have been illuminating and they may have listened to the advice of Chief of General Staff N. V. Ogarkov who wanted to deploy more troops:

> "On December 10, 1979, the Defense Minister of the USSR D. F. Ustinov summoned Chief of General Staff N. V. Ogarkov, and informed him that the Politburo had reached a preliminary decision of a temporary introduction of the Soviet troops into Afghanistan, and ordered him to prepare approximately 75 to 80 thousand people. N. V. Ogarkov was surprised and outraged by such a decision, and said that 75 thousand would not be able to stabilize the situation, and that he was against the introduction of troops, calling it "reckless." The Minister of Defense cut him off harshly: "Are you going to teach the Politburo? Your only duty is to carry out the orders…."[15]

12. http://www.politicsforum.org/forum/viewtopic.php?f=65&t=99552 accessed 27 March 2010.
13. http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB57/soviet.html accessed 27 March 2010.
14. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Kerensky accessed 27 March 2010.
15. http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB57/soviet.html Document Eight, pg. 1, accessed 27 March 2007.

Preparations for the intervention were soon underway: On the same day, Ogarkov was promptly summoned to Leonid Brezhnev's office, where the so-called "small Politburo" (Andropov, Gromyko, and Ustinov) was in session.

> "The Chief of General Staff once again tried to convince those who were present, that the Afghan problem should be decided by the political means, instead of relying on using force. He cited the traditions of the Afghan people, who never tolerated foreigners on their soil, warned them about the possible involvement of our troops in military operations, – but everything was in vain. However, in the end of the conversation they tentatively determined that for the time being they would not make the final decision on the immediate military assistance, but, in any case, the troops should start preparing.
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> "In the evening, D. Ustinov gathered the Ministry of Defense Collegium and informed the narrow circle of officials from among the highest military leadership that possibly in the near future the decision would be made to use the Soviet troops in Afghanistan, and that they had to start preparing the appropriate forces."[16]

The Soviet military was being put in motion, despite its own misgivings. The "small Politburo" had carried the day with Brezhnev and shortly he provided a hand-written note for key signatures. The following evidence that essentially three men were responsible for the decision to invade was placed in Politburo records on December 12, 1979:

> "1. Ratify evaluations and measures set forth by Andropov Yu. V., Ustinov, D.F., and Gromyko A.A…. Execution of all those measures should be entrusted to Comr[ades] Andropov Yu. V., Ustinov D. F., and Gromyko A. A.
>
> "2. Entrust Comrs. Andropov Yu. Y., Ustinov D. F., and Gromyko A. A., to keep the CC Politburo informed on the status of the execution of the outlined measures."[17]

The Communist Party of the Soviet Union was about to begin its first aggressive war with Soviet troops by invading Afghanistan – a response to the fears of three key leaders, Andropov, Ustinov, and Gromyko, rather than the results of a wide debate within the larger Politburo or the Central Committee. In spite of the misgivings of key military officers, the Soviet Union was entering a war with Muslim extremists in Afghanistan. And what were the fears that drove these three men to this decision? Several are obvious when viewed with the hindsight provided by time and the declassified documents.

First, Brezhnev was ill and each of the three members of the "small Politburo" viewed themselves as possible successors to him. This was not the time to be indecisive, if they were to be able to rise to the top of the Soviet government. There were potential enemies gathering on the southern border for the first time in the history of the USSR and the newly socialist Afghanistan was threatened from within. Brezhnev's recent doctrine that stated that once a country was socialist, it would not be allowed to reverse course, provided them with the necessary "top cover" for their actions.

Second, they were fearful that connections initiated by the Shah between Iran and Afghanistan would continue under Ayatollah Khomeini and any Islamic fundamentalist victory in Afghanistan could unite the two nations against Soviet regional interests. Any militant Islamic activity along the Soviet Union's southern border might spread easily into their southern republics that were inhabited by Muslim populations.

Third, they believed that American regional strength had grown at Soviet expense during the decade and for all intents and purposes, Egypt and Somalia were now American allies. After Muhammad Taraki was ousted by Hafizullah Amin in Kabul, there were increasing Soviet fears that Amin

16. Ibid, pg. 2.
17. http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB57/soviet.html Document Nine, accessed 27 March 2010.

might follow the course taken by Egypt's Sadat and Somalia's Barre and break relations with the Soviet Union and the development of a pro-American regime on their southern border was a serious potential problem. Amin's repression of the Afghan population was also fueling the Islamic insurgency and his removal might tamp down both problems they potentially faced.

Fourth, China, Pakistan, and the United States obviously were cooperating against Soviet regional interests. Pakistan allowed American U-2 flights to depart from their airfield in Peshawar and facilitated Henry Kissinger's 1971 visit to China that led to President Nixon's visit in 1972. Meanwhile, the Soviets were engaged in border skirmishes with China's People's Liberation Army in 1969 and 1972. The geostrategic implications of these three countries working together in the region were not lost on the small group of old men composing the Soviet leadership.

The minutes from a Politburo Session on March 17-18, 1979, read: "…Bands of saboteurs and terrorists, having infiltrated from the territory of Pakistan, trained and armed not only with the participation of Pakistani forces, but also of China, the United States of America and Iran, are committing atrocities in Herat."[18]

Finally in the midst of all these major concerns, the select members of the "small Politburo" had to be concerned about the loss of Soviet prestige and the parallel loss of their international momentum. The key players were keenly aware that if they didn't maintain their momentum regarding political issues that were important to them, someone else would gain it. At this key point in the Cold War, Soviet decision-makers could not have been pleased with the potential emergence of a United States-China-Pakistan alliance with bases on their border with Afghanistan, a hostile Shi'a regime in Iran, and their own restive Muslim republics and these rapidly growing populations in the general vicinity of these enemies. In their view, they had plenty to fear as the decision to invade Afghanistan was upon the Soviet military leadership forced by the Kremlin's politicians.

Their problems began immediately and by 1985 the new Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, decided that Soviet forces would depart Afghanistan since their only alternative involved 25 additional years of combat. The Soviets knew Afghanistan and its complex society very well, but they still made great errors – some of which are being repeated as fast as the situations can be recreated.

The greatest error the Soviets made – and which is being repeated – involves a complete misunderstanding of the cleavages within Afghan society. The largest and probably most significant division involves the way the different ethnic groups govern themselves combined with the societal split between the urban and rural Pashtuns (often within the same tribe). When the lack of understanding of this basic pair of factors is coupled with the overwhelming impulse of world powers to modernize Afghanistan as a conduit to stability, the effort increases the animosity between the two opposing groups only to worsen the very conflict they seek to resolve.

Most of Afghanistan's ethnic groups readily accept governance through a super-ordinate authority, a powerful individual whose decisions were as binding as law to the members of the group. The Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras, Ismailis, Baluch, and the other ethnic groups of Afghanistan readily accepted the leadership of powerful men – essentially powerful warlords. For example, the Tajiks were led by Ahmad Shah Masood and Ismail Khan; Uzbeks accepted Dostam as their leader, Naderi led the Ismailis, and the others were governed by powerful men. The Pashtun ethnic group has precisely the opposite form of governance and their clans are controlled by councils of village elders, called jirgas, from which the most prestigious of the group served as their nominal "chief." Their form of near Athenian democracy puts them at odds with the other ethnic groups' means of government.

The Pashtuns, however, were – and remain – separated into two general groups, again based on the type of governance they accept. Akbar S. Ahmed[19] divides them into two basic groups. Those who remain generally nomadic within tribal systems that govern themselves and maintain their

18. http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB57/r1.pd, Document One, accessed 27 March 2010.
19. See Ahmad, Akbas S., *Pukhtun Economy and Society: Traditional Structure and Economic Development in a Tribal Society*, London: Boston and Henley, 1980, for a full discussion of the Nang vs. Qalang concept.

security by having each man in the tribe armed to defend the group he labeled as "nang" (or "honor") tribes who relied upon traditional customary rules to govern themselves. Ahmed's other part of the same tribe was labeled "qalang" (or "taxes"), as their most identifying characteristic is that they follow the rules of a man they place in charge of their settlement and expected him to form a militia responsible for maintaining their security. In the thousands of years of nang and qalang segments of the same tribe, the nang clans would raid into qalang settlements when their own resources were limited. As a political result, the raiding nang clans gradually opposed their settled qalang relatives and over time their separation grew.

Out of this tension, the qalang tribes that accepted governance from "top-down" gradually allied themselves politically and militarily with the non-Pashtun ethnic groups and began to recognize that the development of a nation-state ruled by a strong central government was in their best interests. At the opposite extreme, the nang clans – and occasionally most of the population of entire tribes – realized that their relative autonomy would end if the other extreme in the political system was successful in building a strong central government. Within this political system, the monarchy seems to have worked as a loose "keeper of the balance of power" between the settled and rural groups. As one became too powerful, the monarchy tilted in the opposite direction to maintain the balance between the two opposing groups. This system ended with the 1973 coup that deposed the monarchy as the new president Daoud and his political allies concentrated their efforts on the creation of a strong central government. As this effort was underway, Yunus Khalis[20] – and many people like him – left the country to prepare for armed opposition to those individuals and political parties involved in modernizing Afghanistan under a strong central government. The stage was being set for a violent confrontation between the nang and qalang and the Soviets failed to understand this – and they were not alone.

But the Soviets followed the instability in Afghanistan and made their decisions regarding support for the Taraki regime at its highest levels. For example, there was a Politboro meeting on 22 March 1979 at which Leonid Brezhnev, himself, reported on a meeting he recently had with Taraki:

> "We reviewed the fundamental issues about measures to assist Afghanistan at the last meeting of the Politburo on Monday, and the measures envisaged by our decision are being realized in practice…. The situation in Afghanistan is pretty complicated. Now the affair seems to have improved…. Taking into account that the Afghan leadership has made not a few mistakes regarding repressions, in the conversation attention was paid to the fact that primarily political and economic means should play the main role in attracting broad strata of the population to support the current regime. I directly said to Comrade Taraki that repressions are a sharp weapon and it must be applied extremely and extremely cautiously, and only in the case when there are serious legal grounds for it."[21]

"Political and economic means" were to become central to the Soviet efforts to stabilize Afghanistan, but their error was in modernization efforts that benefited the qalang, i.e. settled, components of Afghanistan at the expense of the nang – the rural population from most ethnic groups. As efforts were made to strengthen the settled portion of the population, the rural Afghans were increasingly threatened and rallied to the calls from their religious leaders to defend both tribe and Islam from the external threat as the situation gradually stabilized – temporarily.

Kosygin and Chernenko reported:

> "Herat for all intents and purposes is now in the hands of the government … that in Herat the situation is more normal now."[22]

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20. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mohammad_Yunus_Khalis accessed 27 March 2010.
21. http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=va2.document&identifier=5034DC16-96B6-175C-9398A6CF1E990EBD&sort=Subject&item=Andrei%20A.%20Gromyko accessed 28 March 2010.
22. Ibid.

Also present in this meeting was a key player in Soviet politics, a man who would eventually make a key decision regarding Afghanistan and its "pretty complicated" situation – Mikhail Gorbachev. He would have known about the situation related to Herat where a revolt occurred earlier in the year. Here the complexity of Afghanistan is partly revealed. Gilles Dorronsoro explains:

> "Shortly before the revolt in the city, revolts took place in a number of villages in the province…. However, these were not organized and differed in their immediate causes: a census in Salimi and forced labor on a road in Gharyan. On the morning of 15 March the peasants of the surrounding area gathered around the mosques together with the townsmen and, encouraged by the mullahs, converged on Herat, attacking all symbols of the state and communism indiscriminately. The revolt of the 17th division, which began immediately after that in the town, brought the army on to the side of the rebels."[23]

Here the communists managed to alienate the settled Afghans with their "political and economic means." While a census may be innocuous, census takers drew the anger of the local populations by asking the names of the female members of families and through the use of female census employees and antagonized the settled villagers who took up arms against them. Forced labor on a road may have been viewed as preparations to move troops quickly in case of emergency and was probably a factor in the revolt. This also happened in Kandahar to the east:

> "Also, forty-eight elders from the Karz district[24] were killed in the presence of Engineer Zarif, the Khalqi governor of Kandahar. They were killed because they had protested that government officials should register only the numbers, not the names, of their female folk when they were talking a census of the population."[25]

At the same time, the rebellion in Herat Province had additional influences to complicate the analysis done by the Soviets. Since it was located close to Iran, there was an influence from the revolutionary government recently successful in overthrowing the Shah and would naturally support the Tajiks and Shi'a living in Herat. Tajiks speak Dari, a version of Farsi, the language spoken in Iran. Second, the revolt in Herat probably had anti-Pashtun overtones since the rulers of Afghanistan nearly always had been Pashtuns. Under the social conditions found in Herat Province, the nang vs. qalang split wasn't as important as the other complicating factors. Modernization and the cruelty of the communist modernizers clearly were.

Abdul Haq, one of three brothers who served in Yunus Khalis' group and who was to die cruelly at the hands of the Taliban government in 2001 explained how the traditional controls of the tribal system had been broken down by the communists:

> "The problem," says Abdul Haq, commander of the Kabul region and another member of the command council', is that the Soviets destroyed parts of the traditional fabric of Afghan society. The country has been invaded many times before. And always in the past, the religious leaders would call for jihad ('holy war'); the tribal leaders would provide the resources, and the people would fight.' But in trying to create an egalitarian society, the communists broke down those distinctions and left nothing in their place. In many areas, they installed secular leaders who, backed only by Soviet troops, had little or no legitimacy.
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> "During the early years of the war,' says Haq, 'when we were fighting in the mountains, the CIA and Pakistan

23. Dorronsoro, Gilles, *Revolution Unending: Afghanistan, 1979 to the Present*, New York: Colombia University Press, 2005, pg. 99.
24. Karz is the home district of the Karzai family.
25. Kakar, M. Hassan, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response, 1979-1982*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995, pg. 203

> funded the fundamentalists because they figured that those groups were least likely to compromise with the regime. The problem is that the fundamentalists are now much stronger than the democrats. And they don't compromise, period."[26]

Both the Afghan communists and the Soviets tried to modernize Afghanistan through the shortcut of removing the land-owning khans who served as the traditional leaders of the rural tribes. As the khans were killed or driven off as refugees, this left the clerics in a position to replace them, and political parties opposed to the communists began to form around religious leaders. Sufi leaders Gailani, Mohammeddi, and Mojededdi were soon in charge of the latest generation of mujahedin along with the revolutionary religious leaders Sayyaf, Khalis, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and Burhanuddin Rabbani, all of whom operated out of Pakistan. None of the major anti-Soviet parties operating from Pakistan were led by any of the traditional leaders, i.e. the khans, who were normally in a position to offset the potential power of the mullahs. In displacing the secular authority figures of the rural tribes, the communists and Soviets created a power vacuum that was filled by the clerics – leaving calls of jihad in their wake instead of relatively reasonable secular leaders who might have entered into negotiated settlements.

The Afghan communists and the Soviets also worked diligently to develop national institutions that would allow for the development of a modern state – a state that was being imposed on a traditional society that always suffered greatly under any powerful regime in Kabul. Their recent strong monarchs, Abdur Rahman (the "Iron Amir") and Nadir Shah, governed through authoritarian methods while dividing the population into hostile groups that fought one another. Under Abdur Rahman, the Pashtuns went to war to the point of ethnic cleansing against the Hazaras, and Nadir Shah managed a civil war against the Tajiks who occupied Kabul's throne for nine months and encouraged a Pashtun invasion of the Shomali Plans north of Kabul to ensure that Tajik power was broken. The Afghan communists under Taraki began a reign of terror not unlike what occurred under Abdur Rahman's secret police and the rural population expected this form of treatment from any government in Kabul. As a result, two opposing sides generally began to form during this violent period of Afghanistan's history, with the communists nominally allied with the "settled" population against the rural population who were being led to jihad by their religious leaders instead of the khans.

It was nearly impossible for the communists and the Soviets to create respected national institutions that would attract the rural population to support the central government. In addition to the rural Pashtun tribes generally rejecting centralized control, the national government lacked any actual legitimacy when viewed from the perspective of the rural people. Zahir Shah was in exile in Italy and the killing of Mohammad Daud removed the last of the Durrani leaders who had ruled Afghanistan since its creation in 1747. Both Taraki and Amin, the first of the communist rulers in Kabul, were Ghilzai Pashtuns, a fact that was not lost on the large Durrani tribes whose opportunities for patronage were eliminated with the loss of their influence in Kabul. Ghilzai tribes had also been in frequent rebellion against their Durrani cousins and they were now in charge of the government as a result of the coup and the murder of Taraki which allowed Amin to move into the presidential palace. Under these conditions, the new rulers lacked any legitimacy in the eyes of the rural Pashtuns, as well as the rural members of the other ethnic groups.

The Soviets were well aware of this situation, but their leadership was very concerned about losing Afghanistan to their unstated "enemy," probably the United States. But the Soviet leaders were very well informed on the internal situation in Afghanistan and the potential for worsening the situation if they intervened with armed forces.

"During a Politburo meeting "About the Exacerbation of the Situation in the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan and Our Possible Moves" on March 17, when the situation in Herat appeared grave, the discussion seemed to focus on the unacceptability of allowing the government's opponents to get the upper hand, as the following comments by Foreign Minister Andrei A. Gromyko and Prime Minister Alexei N. Kosygin indicated:

26. http://articles.latimes.com/1992-02-23/magazine/tm-4946_1_holy-war/2 accessed 29 march 2010.

> "GROMYKO. We have to discuss what we will do if the situation gets worse. Today, the situation in Afghanistan for now is unclear to many of us. Only one thing is clear – we cannot surrender Afghanistan to the enemy. We have to think how to achieve this. Maybe we won't have to introduce troops.
>
> "KOSYGIN. All of us agree – we must not surrender Afghanistan. From this point, we have to work out first of all a political document, to use all political means in order to help the Afghan leadership to strengthen itself, to provide the support which we've already planned, and to leave as a last resort the use of force....

Yet, on March 18, as the Politburo continued to deliberate, a consensus emerged, led by suddenly cautious KGB chairman Andropov, against direct Soviet military intervention. Even Gromyko, despite his admonition only a day before that Afghanistan must not be surrendered, gave an impassioned, indeed prescient warning against dispatching troops.

> "ANDROPOV. We know Lenin's teaching about a revolutionary situation. Whatever type of situation we are talking about in Afghanistan, it is not that type of situation. Therefore, I believe that we can suppress a revolution in Afghanistan only with the aid of our bayonets, but that is for us entirely inadmissible. We cannot take such a risk....
>
> "GROMYKO. I fully support Comrade Andropov's proposal to exclude a measure as the introduction of our troops into Afghanistan. The [Afghan] army there is unreliable. Thus our army if it enters Afghanistan will be an aggressor. Against whom will it fight? Against the Afghan people first of all, and it will have to shoot at them. Comrade Andropov correctly noted that indeed the situation in Afghanistan is not ripe for a [socialist] revolution. And all that we have done in recent years with such effort in terms of a détente in international tensions, arms reductions, and much more – all that would be thrown back. Of course, this will be a nice gift for China. All the nonaligned countries will be against us. In a word, serious consequences are to be expected from such an action. One must ask, and what would we gain? Afghanistan with its present government, with a backward economy, with inconsequential weight in international affairs. On the other side, we must keep in mind that from a legal point of view too we would not be justified in sending troops. According to the UN Charter a country can appeal for assistance, and we could send troops, in case it is subject to external aggression. Afghanistan has not been subject to any aggression. This is its internal affair, a revolutionary internal conflict, battle of one group of the population against another...."[27]

And the Soviet leadership knew who they would be fighting in March 1979, well before the actual invasion. Kosygin said:

> "With whom will it be necessary for us to fight in the event it becomes necessary to deploy troops – who will it be that rises against the present leadership of Afghanistan? They are all Mohammedans, people of one belief, and their faith is sufficiently strong that they can close ranks on that basis."[28]

The Soviet leaders also knew that the Afghanistan communist government was corrupt and had no actual legitimacy with most of the population. Arrests and executions in the army also served to reduce its overall loyalty to the government. Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin related a telephone

27. http://www.wilsoncenter.org/topics/pubs/e-dossier_4.pdf accessed 02 April 2010, pp. 70-71.
28. Ibid, pg. 73.

discussion he had with the Afghan leader, Taraki:

> "I then asked him, would it really be impossible for you to form part of a division from the population of Kabul to assist the various provinces, to equip them and, in like fashion, to arm them? To that he responded that there was nobody to train them. I then said to him, how is it possible, given how many people were trained in the military academic academies in the Soviet Union, given how many of the old military cadres have come out on the side of the government, that there is now nobody to do the training? How then, I asked him, can we support you? Almost without realizing it, Comrade Taraki responded that almost nobody does support the government."[29]

A report provided to the Politboro on April 12, 1979 explained some of the reasons that the communist regime lacked real legitimacy:

> "It is known that following the victory in the April revolution, extreme measures and unjustified repression were often allowed in solving both internal party and government problems. There were cases of financial corruption, as well as violence towards arrested persons during investigations. The dissatisfaction with unjustified repression affected the army, which still remains the main basis for the regime. This makes the counterrevolutionary task of dictating the system not only from within the country but also from abroad significantly easier. Many commanders feel uncertain and fear arrest after witnessing their colleague's arrest and disappearance."[30]

The Soviets also had a realistic assessment of the opposition they would face if they intervened:

> "The Afghan reactionary forces are very skillfully taking advantage of the almost complete illiteracy of the population, complex international and intertribal conflicts, religious fanaticism and nationalism. Subversive actions, sabotage and the resistance of the overthrown class of exploiters are deepening the economic problems, lowering industrial and agricultural output, as well as hampering business activity, raising prices and reducing the influx of revenue into the state budget. The actions of reactionary forces, which are at present headed by Muslim leaders, who rely on the 'Muslim Brothers' organization, have banded together on the basis of their common negative relation to the new order in separatist and nationalist groupings and in the pro-Maoist organization 'Shoalee Javid'.
>
> "The reactionary forces have consolidated somewhat recently after overcoming the confusion following the rapid and rather unexpected victory of the April revolution. They have started to change the forms of struggle, shifting from covert subversive actions to open armed forms of activity. They were able not only to regroup within the country but also to build wide connections with imperialist and clerical groups abroad, which supply them with active propaganda support as well as money and weapons. The tactic of the enemies of the revolution is to widen the front of the struggle, to force the government to disperse its forces across different regions of the country. Reactionary forces use slogans of extreme anticommunism and anti-Sovietism. Their main political goal is the overthrow of the revolutionary democratic order and the creation of a 'free Islamic republic' in Afghanistan."[31]

Kosygin explained the Soviet position on moving troops into Afghanistan to Taraki in a Moscow meeting that occurred on March 20, 1979:

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29. Ibid, pg. 141.
30. Ibid, pg. 68.
31. Ibid, pg. 68.

> "But the deployment of our forces in the territory of Afghanistan would immediately alarm the international community and would invite sharply unfavorable multipronged consequences. This, in effect, would be a conflict not only with the imperialist countries, but also a conflict with one's own people. Our mutual enemies are just waiting for the moment when Soviet forces appear on Afghan territory. This would give them an excuse to deploy on Afghan territory military groups hostile to you. I would again like to underline that the question of deploying our forces has been examined by us from every direction; we carefully studied all aspects of this action and came to the conclusion that if our troops were introduced, the situation in your country would not only not improve, but would worsen. One cannot deny that our troops would have to fight not only with foreign aggressors, but also with a certain number of your people. And a people does not forgive such things."[32]

From a close review of the Soviet records, it becomes exceedingly apparent that the Soviet leadership knew very well about the political and social complexity of nearby Afghanistan and that they were not surprised by the difficulty they encountered after they intervened in what was essentially a civil war between the settled and rural populations of the country. And they knew that "a people does not forgive such things," but they made logical efforts to mitigate the large problems they encountered.

- Leadership problems resulting from the "unjustified repression" of the traditional leaders and the purges within the army's officer corps were addressed by the forcible removal of Hafizullah Amin – by killing him in a Spetznaz raid on the presidential palace – and replacing him with Babrak Karmal, a more acceptable personality. Unfortunately for Karmal and the Soviets, he was viewed as little more than a Soviet "puppet" installed after Amin's assassination. By this time, the population had been so polarized that no one could have resolved the problem created by the arrival of the Soviet forces, something foreseen by the Soviet leadership.

- As the Soviets prepared to leave, they followed the British strategy when they left the violent country. They installed a very strong, independent leader. The British maneuvered both Dost Mohammad and Abdur Rahman on to Kabul's throne when they withdrew from the country and the Soviets chose the KhAD (secret police/intelligence agency) commander, Mohammad Najib, who soon Islamized his name to become "Najibullah," as Afghanistan's president. All of their efforts to build connections to the religious Afghans through the creation of a "Ministry of Religious Affairs" and the convening of "grand councils," the Loya Jirga, failed to attract additional support from either the fence-sitting population seeking to remain neutral or the active mujahedin parties that were engaging them in active combat operations.

- Massive economic programs were developed and implemented in an effort to rally the resistance to support the central government. Civilian advisers were sent and large factories were developed. For example, some of their efforts are quite familiar:

> "Like most counter-insurgencies, the Soviet intervention was never a strictly military operation. Soviet leaders realized quickly that the war had caused uproar throughout the world and had brought the Cold War to a level of tension unseen in decades. They also realized fairly early on that the situation could not be resolved through military means alone. They hoped that economic aid and improved governance would help give the Kabul government greater legitimacy. Thus parallel to the military effort of the 40th army, there was also a smaller "army" of Soviet advisers working to rebuild state institutions, improve the party's internal cohesiveness and relationship with the population, and carry out agricultural reform. Besides Soviet advisers in the armed force of the DRA, thousands of technicians, educators, and

32. Ibid, pg. 72.

party activists travelled to Afghanistan to help with an un-planned and often improvised counter-insurgency by carrying out a similarly un-planned and improvised nation building project.[33]

"Party advisers were also intimately involved in the effort to build up the country's economy. In 1979 and 1980, the USSR provided 500 million rubles of economic aid to the DRA, both credits and non-repayable aid, including seed, fertilizer, sugar, oil, agricultural products, and automobiles. Advisers in Kabul took part in preparing economic programs, following directives from Moscow. Political advisors, as well as advisors attached to the Ministry of Agriculture and Agricultural Reform and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs all took part in the drafting of laws on land reform. The more radical aspects of Taraki-Amin land redistribution plans were abandoned, and some of the land and property confiscated by the regime was returned. Advisors posted in the provinces were responsible for overseeing that these new reforms were carried out. They were also responsible for other aspects of Moscow's economic program in Afghanistan, making sure that economic aid reached the villages. Thus, a party adviser might have to play the role of logistics manager, sometimes seeing to such minute details as the procurement of lorries to deliver goods. Finally, party advisers, military advisers, and others took part in the effort to draft recruits for the Afghan army, a persistent problem throughout the period. The government's unpopularity, fear of repercussions from opposition fights, inefficiency in the organization of the draft, and corruption were all contributing factors."[34]

There is also an eerie foreshadowing of a future Afghanistan and a new "invader" encountering identical problems:

"Within several years of their arrival in Afghanistan, it became clear that the nation building project Moscow had undertaken was failing. Economic aid often did not reach its intended destination, as items like trucks, tanks, cotton, and food products were either diverted and re-sold or fell prey to hijackers. Rather than the PDPA becoming a functioning governing party, it continued to be consumed by internal rivalry. Some of the difficulties in political work were similar to the ones that the Soviets faced in their effort to improve the military situation. As additional Soviet advisors or troops became involved, the less the DRA government seemed able to act independently. The problem of how to restore the ability of the Afghan army to fight independently, or of leaders to make decisions without turning to their Soviet tutors for help was one of the major stumbling blocks in stabilizing the situation in the country and creating the conditions for a Soviet withdrawal."[35]

And:

"Bureaucratic infighting and inefficiency were a constant problem. Already in 1981, Pravda correspondent I. Schedrov, in a secret memo forwarded to the CC CPSU, noted that Soviet aid was being undermined by the split between the military on the one hand and party, state, and other (presumably intelligence) officials on the other. Each group thought that it should have the dominant decision making role. This led to a situation where 'in the provinces and in Kabul there are two centres, often in conflict, with no mediator.' At the same time, the problem was exacerbated by the infighting among Soviet advisors. 'Conflicts between our advisors and representatives, the lack of coordination of our position and actions, greatly reduce the effectiveness or USSR aid to Afghanistan…. The problem of creating in

33. http://www.wilsoncenter.org/topics/pubs/WP60_Web_Final.pdf accessed 20 April 25, 2010, pg. 2.
34. Ibid, pp. 15-16.
35. Ibid, pg. 17.

Kabul a single Soviet coordinating organ with the corresponding powers is pressing and demands speedy resolution.' This problem did not seem to abate with time, as senior Soviet representatives were still discussing its effects in March 1984.

"Infighting and lack of coordination among advisers and other Soviet officials had numerous practical consequences that undermined the Soviet mission. In a number of cases, 'liberation' of villages and successful efforts to win over rebel commanders floundered when some Soviet advisers or Afghan officials refused to cooperate. The party adviser Ilya Elvertanov recalls the difficulty he had both securing the agreement of ministers in Kabul and Soviet officers to leave an armed detachment for his exposed team and making sure that the established trade links with Soviet enterprises in Tajikistan actually worked like they weresupposed to."[36]

The split seen between combat officers and development officials seen in Afghanistan today was also seen during the Soviet period:

"One example was a political officer in the military who worked with the political detachments in the DRA military. Colonel Shershnev developed a reputation as a different sort of advisor, one who reached out to the local population. In 1984 he sent a report, addressed to Politburo Chairman Konstantin Chernenko that stated 'The operations have become of a police character, with punitive measures, and as a result we have been pulled in to a war with the people with no prospects of a positive outcome. Inhumane acts by Soviet troops with regard to the peaceful population are widespread and systematic and manifest themselves in the form of robbery, unjustified and unfounded use of firearms, destruction of villages, dishonoring of mosques.' Chernenko made a point of saying that Shershnev was not to be touched. Shershnev was not touched, but his promotion to general was held back for about two years, and after the war he was pushed into retirement. His case suggests that advisers operated in a rather rigid environment, and dissent was not always tolerated.

"Shershnev's report also underscores another problem with the nation-building aspect of counter-insurgency. Economic aid in such situations tends to be undermined by the massive destructive power of modern weapons unleashed on behalf of the government. The problem was exacerbated in the Afghan case because the Soviet military adjusted slowly to the demands of counter-insurgency warfare in the Afghan terrain and relied heavily on aerial bombardment. At the same time, military leaders may have pointed out to Moscow that the Afghan problem could not be solved by military means alone, but they either did not realize that their actions often made the situation worse or were unable to find a different approach. As one officer put it "warriors receive medals on their chest and stars on their epaulettes and money not for reconciliation, but for conducting combat operations." As Shershnev's reports suggests, this feeling was widespread among senior Soviet officers."[37]

There are parallels to the current situation in Afghanistan, as well:

"Soon after Mikhail Gorbachev took over as General Secretary in 1985 he began to look for new approaches to the Afghan problem. Although he believed that the Soviet Union must withdraw from Afghanistan, he departed only slightly from his predecessors in that he continued to look for ways the Soviet Union could withdraw without facing the collapse of its Kabul client and the loss of prestige and reputation as a defender of third world

36. Ibid, pp. 18-19.
37. Ibid, pg. 20.

states. Until late 1987, at least, that meant leaving Afghanistan with a stable, functioning government and a self-reliant military. At the same time Gorbachev and other leaders came to realize that certain aspects of their nation-building approach had failed and sought to find a new approach. They realized that Karmal had made little progress in reaching out to the population, that economic aid was not reaching its intended destination, and that the *mujahadeen* as a whole still had the widespread support of the population. The Kabul government had not made major gains in legitimacy…. Gorbachev's injunction when Karmal came to Moscow in October 1985 was part of a continuing leitmotif: 'Widen your social base. Learn, at last, to lead a dialogue with the tribes, to use the particularities [of the situation]. Try to get the support of the clergy. Give up the leftist bend in economics. Learn to organize the support of the private sector…'"[38]

And there was a harbinger in the story of the Soviet experience in Afghanistan:

"The realization that Soviet aid was not going to stabilize the situation in Afghanistan pushed Gorbachev towards withdrawal and forced him to focus primarily on international diplomacy to provide a dignified exit for Soviet troops and reconciliation within the country."[39]

Looking closely at the now-defunct Soviet Union and the rational decisions that their leaders made as they deliberated ordering an armed intervention into Afghanistan's civil war seems to show that large organizations tend to solve big problems with similar solutions. A careful review also shows how little the situation in Afghanistan has changed in the three decades since the Soviets intervened. Corruption, incompetence, fissures within the government, and the perfected capability of letting foreigners make decisions and fight battles has been a consistent factor.

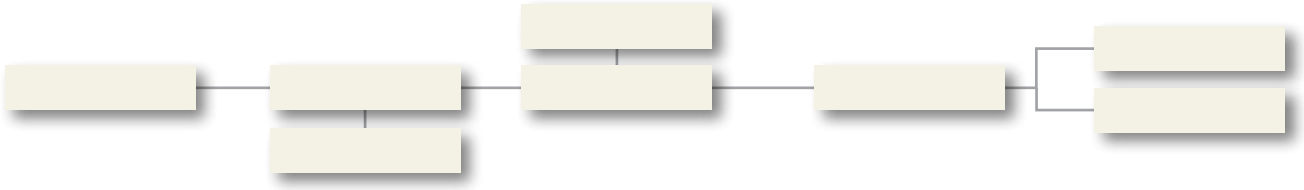
The eye-opening sentence in all of the Soviet papers related to their interaction with Afghanistan's leaders was when Gorbachev told Babrak Karmal in October 1985: "Widen your social base. Learn, at last, to lead a dialogue with the tribes…."

38. Ibid, pp. 23-24.
39. Ibid, pg. 27.

TRIBAL ANALYSIS CENTER

Traditional anthropological research conducted among tribes inhabiting remote areas where insurgents and criminals operate has become increasingly difficult to implement. Studies carried out among people living in small-scale societies now are nearly impossible due to the physical dangers associated with the civil and religious unrest found in those areas. Swat, for example, has become so dangerous that Frederick Barth's studies only could be repeated at the risk of the investigator's life. Similar research is not feasible among Burma's Rohinga tribes located on both sides of the border with Bangladesh, as well as with the Pashtuns in Afghanistan's interior and within Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas, where even Pakistan's army enters with reluctance.

Given the difficulties of conducting direct fieldwork in conflictive areas, the Tribal Analysis Center utilizes an indirect approach. Using multidisciplinary research, we seek to collect and analyze data obtained from a wide variety of sources, both current and historical. In the absence of new ethnographic fieldwork to update our base of knowledge, the Tribal Analysis Center compiles and summarizes existing research and documents on tribal societies, combining this material with contemporary press reports and articles. We assume that much can be gleaned from well-informed observers who are not anthropologists, ranging from journalists and travelers to government officials.



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