



INTRODUCTION

I

Near the end of the overnight flight from Moscow to Kabul on Afghanistan's Ariana Airlines, the sun rises over that beautiful, battered country. As I peered down from a rattling jet during a recent trip in late fall, the dawn light of a cloudless morning revealed an endless succession of dusty, reddish brown mountain peaks and valleys. Reputed for its harshness, the small, deeply impoverished country—lodged between Iran and Pakistan, just below old Soviet Central Asia—is also physically stunning. I could understand how millennia of conquerors had been seduced. I was traveling there to learn how one of a long line of invading armies—in this case, belonging to a global superpower with virtually no limit to the amount it could spend on its military—became the latest to find defeat at the hands of local rebels.

Afghanistan's fate has been determined, more than anything, by its position on the globe. A persuasive current of scholarly theory about the nature of empires has it that geographic determinism—the lay of the land as well as its weather—helps define which territories become centers of empires and which remain battle-scarred frontier lands lodged between competing powers. Confluences of waterways and other transportation routes and natural defenses help form the centers of power. At the same time, mountains and

other geographical features on the peripheries have long been intrinsic impediments to conquest. Deserts, river valleys, and narrow mountain passes, in which Afghanistan is rich, have greatly favored the resident peoples who know them.

Most Americans view the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as a naked act of aggression by a ruthless, totalitarian state. The reality was far more complex. For more than a year, Soviet leaders rejected pleas from the Afghan communist government to send troops to help put down rebellion by the rural population protesting the regime's merciless modernization programs. After Moscow did invade, it found itself locked in conflict—essentially, a civil war—it could barely comprehend. While it cannot be said that Afghanistan triggered the Soviet collapse, it did project an image of a failing empire unable to deal with a handful of bedraggled partisans in a remote part of its southern frontier.

Of course, the war was also a tragic human story. Relating his part in it, Leonid Bogdanov, the KGB's chief representative in Kabul in 1979, described a meeting soon after the Soviet invasion. It was with the former head of Afghanistan's intelligence service, Asadullah Sarwari, who had fled the country in a KGB escape plot Bogdanov had planned.

"You know about everything you've taken part in here," the Afghan told Bogdanov. "You really should write a book about it."

"I don't know. . . . No one would believe it," the Russian replied. "It would read too much like a detective thriller."

During my interview with Bogdanov, we agreed that the war involved many levels of authority and many stages of psychological moods or emotional contortions. Some of the events and intrigues that led to the invasion strain the capacity to believe, so tight were the twists and uncanny the coincidences. Did the decision to go to war really turn on such random timing and seemingly insignificant personal matters?

Brezhnev's superficial but emotional tie to the country's first communist president, Mohammed Taraki, was a principal cause of the Soviet invasion. The president's ouster and murder offended the Soviet leader, especially because Hafizullah Amin, Taraki's rival,

had promised the Kremlin he'd do no such thing. Nevertheless, Taraki's killing served more as a pretext for action than a motive. Since taking power the year before, Afghanistan's communist government had accelerated a reform program, including education for women and land redistribution, that had dragged on for most of the twentieth century. But now the government's violence rivaled some of Afghanistan's bloodiest chapters. And the red flags, orchestrated pro-government demonstrations, and other highly visible examples of communist pomp under Taraki particularly riled the rural population—and helped lead to a volatile situation and increasing attacks, mostly against government officials. The Kremlin blamed much of the trouble on Amin—who, compared to Taraki before him and the Soviet-installed Babrak Karmal after—was actually a relatively able if utterly ruthless leader.

The Cold War, the backdrop for Afghanistan's internal strife, was another key factor in Moscow's intervention. Although the Politburo would disingenuously accuse the Americans of planning to invade Afghanistan—mostly to justify its own meddling in a sovereign state's affairs—it was genuinely apprehensive that the fall of the Iranian shah in 1979 would prompt Washington to expand its influence in the region by boosting its presence in Afghanistan. Having spent decades and billions of dollars on the country's leadership in an attempt to establish hegemony, Moscow was determined not to let it fall under the influence of its superpower rival.

The Soviet leaders also perceived Afghanistan's proximity to Soviet Central Asia as a threat, fearing its largely Muslim population might become sympathetic to anticommunist activities across the border. Unaware of the real problems plaguing the country, the Politburo was swayed by its own rhetoric of "international duty" to Afghanistan's proletariat. In the end, the slightly senile Politburo all but jumped at the seemingly easy solution of a coup d'état.

Soviet critics of that course could hardly believe the Kremlin's refusal to remember the reasons for the American failure in Vietnam, a conflict Moscow itself had helped protract. But the Soviet leadership indeed ignored the lessons in its certainty that a quick

invasion to prop up a friendly regime would not only increase its influence in Afghanistan but also send a message to all continents that Moscow remained a vital world power.

The actual result was virtually opposite. The Red Army found itself pushed by circumstances and events it had failed to foresee into a brutal struggle against a population that refused to tolerate invaders no matter how friendly they declared themselves to be. The Brezhnev regime's great gamble brought devastating consequences on an epic scale. While the official figure of Soviet war deaths is around 15,000, the real number is believed to be far higher, perhaps even as high as the 75,000 cited by many veterans. Conservative estimates put Afghan deaths at 1.25 million, or 9 percent of the population, with another three-quarters of a million wounded.

Needless to say of the Soviets, it was the soldiers on the ground who suffered the worst consequences of intervening in a complex conflict they didn't fully understand. The conclusions from their narratives throw strong light on how and why Cold War proxy-fighting in Afghanistan helped breed a new kind of global Islamic terrorism. They also suggest what the United States and other Western countries now must do in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other regions where ideology-driven guerrilla fighters face, and sometimes get the better of, conventional military forces.

II

The Soviet war in Afghanistan again confirmed that no power ever successfully conquered that land, which, for all its remoteness, lies at a strategically important crossroad of empires. The Persian ruler Cyrus the Great invaded it in the sixth century BC. Alexander the Great followed three hundred years later, as did the British in the nineteenth century. They vied for control over Afghanistan with the Russian tsarist empire for decades in what came to be called the Great Game. But while foreign forces have often moved into

Afghanistan with relative ease, they've never been able to maintain control. The country's long history of invasion helped spawn a culture of warfare among disparate local tribes and ethnic groups, which fought relentlessly among themselves until united by the common goal of repelling outside encroachers.

Modern Afghanistan, a country of roughly the size of Texas, was established just over a century ago. The British surveyors who drew its borders near the end of the nineteenth century sought to create a buffer state between British India and Russian-controlled Central Asia. In the north, the boundary follows the Amu Dar'ya River, and in the west, the Hari Rud River. In the south, Afghanistan borders the bleak desert territory of Pakistan's Baluchistan. In the east, the British cut through the middle of lands occupied by the Pashtun ethnic group. The scheme favored British interests in India (which abutted Afghanistan until the creation of Pakistan), and has weakened Afghanistan's ability to function as a viable state by physically splitting the Pashtuns—who haven't entirely given up the idea of creating a greater Pashtunistan, something the British were eager to prevent.

Afghanistan's central mountain range, the Hindu Kush, occupies much of the country and helps separate its various ethnic groups. There is no national ethnic group. Although "Afghan" was long equated with "Pashtun," it essentially denotes a resident of the country. The northern population consists chiefly of Turkic peoples—mostly Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Turkmen. Hazaras live in the mountains of central Afghanistan, an area called the Hazarajat. The Turks and Hazaras have traditionally opposed the rule of the Pashtuns to the south—Afghanistan's most powerful grouping, which comprises more than 40 percent of the population. Afghanistan's many smaller groups include the Nuristanis, who live in Hindu Kush valleys in northeast Afghanistan and sometimes have light hair and eyes.

Before the Soviet invasion, the population reached almost 17 million people, some 90 percent of whom were illiterate. Despite the strenuous efforts at modernization and secularization by its twentieth-century rulers, the persistently provincial and impoverished country is still largely governed by tribal sensibilities.

Local chiefs and mullahs often wield as much influence as heads of state, and much of the population has been quick to defend the rural way of life—often represented by Islamic codes—from threats of modernization. More than a century ago, a twenty-three-year-old reporter named Winston Churchill followed the British campaign in Afghanistan for the *Daily Telegraph*. Describing the Pashtun tribes, the future prime minister wrote that “Their system of ethics, which regards treachery and violence as virtues rather than vices, has produced a code of honour so strange and inconsistent that it is incomprehensible to a logical mind.” Many Soviets would later agree.

III

Some British later liked to say the Soviets invaded Afghanistan only because they’d never read Rudyard Kipling’s tales of betrayal and suffering in Afghanistan a century earlier. But even after its own debacle, Moscow never learned the lessons of its war in Afghanistan. Five years after it ended, the Kremlin launched another senseless conflict, this time in Chechnya, where Russian soldiers unable to fight rebels hiding in the Caucasus Mountains ravaged the civilian population instead. The soldiers employed strategy and tactics used in Afghanistan. The post-Soviet Kremlin was already looking backward for its models. When resurgent Russia, giddy from its massive oil wealth, invaded Georgia fifteen years later—Moscow’s first attack against an independent country since the end of communism—it had already reverted to nineteenth-century notions about projecting power.

Western failure to understand the history of the Soviet war in Afghanistan has been even more damaging. Establishment of a viable central government in Afghanistan, an ambitious goal to begin with, has no chance of success without great attention and care from the United States and other Western countries. However, American forces are caught up in hostilities in Iraq, where the population is

increasingly angry about the tens or hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths from terrorist bombings and U.S. military operations.

The United States enabled an insurgency in Afghanistan to best the mighty Red Army in 1989. Only a decade and a half later, the White House said it would be able to withdraw from Iraq mere months after invading, a belief that was paradoxical and bewildering. America attacked to seed democracy in a country with no tradition of representative government. The Soviet Union attempted to build communism in nearby, essentially tribal Afghanistan. Neither approach has worked, partly because the planners assumed that their own political systems would instantly take root in utterly alien territory—never mind that wars against indigenous insurgencies have almost never succeeded, in Afghanistan or anywhere else.

For all the USSR's destructive history—the tens of millions of Russians and other nationalities murdered and many more subjected to terror and dictatorship—a large number of the Afghanistan War's Soviet soldiers and officers genuinely believed they were helping the local population break free of oppression. On the day of the invasion, December 27, 1979, a Soviet military doctor resuscitated Afghan leader Amin after the KGB had poisoned him—the result of an astonishing lack of communication between Soviet intelligence, military, and diplomatic officials. Amin regained consciousness to find his luxurious palace enveloped in a hail of gunfire: Soviet troops were storming in to finally finish him off. The following day, the doctor heard a Radio Kabul report denouncing his patient Amin. The former fellow communist, as the Afghan president had once been praised—at least in official propaganda—was now a murderous enemy of the people. As he was describing the report years later, the doctor's irony was plain. "If it's announced on the radio," he said, "we felt it must be true."

While my account of the disaster includes testimony from the Afghan side, most comes from participating Soviets. Their perception of the war they experienced and endured may help dispel some American illusions about *our* wars, and also make us more sensitive to the volatility of the regions now determining the success or failure of our foreign policy.