

6.19 Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1988)

Background: In the 19th century an expanding Russian Empire viewed Afghanistan as a potential access route to the Indian Ocean. Its efforts to gain influence in the region were stymied by a British empire that wanted to block potential rivals for trade, territory, and influence in the central and southern sector of Asia. A legacy of 19th century Russian expansion into central Asia was that Islam was the second most practiced religion in the Soviet Union before its collapse and Muslims made up a majority of the population in six of the Soviet Union's fifteen states. Concern that radical Islamic movements might challenge Soviet authority in these states was a major reason the Soviet Union fought to keep a secular pro-Soviet government in power in Afghanistan.

During the nine-year Soviet-Afghan War the Soviet Union and India supported the secular Marxist government while the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan supported the Islamist Mujahedeen Resistance. The cost in lives (over 13,000 dead and 35,000 wounded), money, and the credibility of the leadership, helped to destabilize the Soviet Union and was a major factor in the collapse of its communist government.

In April 1979 the governing Soviet Politburo received a report signed by the Foreign Minister, Defense Minister, and head of the secret police. It provided a realistic evaluation of conditions in Afghanistan and recommended against sending Soviet troops to support the pro-Soviet government. Despite the report, seven months later the Soviet government decided to send troops into Afghanistan.

Questions

1. What recommendation was made in this report?
2. Why did the Soviet Foreign Minister, Defense Minister, and head of the secret police make this recommendation?
3. In your opinion, what was their strongest argument?
4. Imagine you are an advisor to U.S. President Barack Obama. After reading this report and reports on 19th century British involvement in Afghanistan, what advice would you give the President about escalating U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan? Why?

“Our Future Policy in Connection with the Situation in Afghanistan”

Memo on Protocol #149 of the Politburo (edited)

Source: <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110060>

1. We are reporting an analysis of the reasons for the situation in the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan which have recently worsened and our thoughts about our possible further steps in helping the leadership of DRA strengthen its position and stabilize the situation in the country. Last April's revolution in Afghanistan occurred in an economically weak, backward feudal country with primitive economic forms and limited domestic resources. The old regime left a great variety of social, economic, and political problems.
2. 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.
3. 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.
4. 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.

5. The weak side of the people's authority is the fact that it has not yet established a firm basis of support in the provincial and urban administrative political organs through which the working people would be involved in the management of the state from the center and particularly from distant areas. The new authority is experiencing serious problems because of its relationship with the clergy and opposition tribal leaders which are the most influential forces in Afghanistan. They play a major role in the counterrevolutionary struggle.

6. The use of Soviet troops in repressing the Afghan counterrevolution would seriously damage the international authority of the USSR and would set back the process of disarmament. In addition, the use of Soviet troops would reveal the weakness of the Taraki government and would widen the scope of the counterrevolution both domestically and abroad, bringing the attack of anti-governmental forces to a much higher level.

7. We should continue to do anything we can to assist the leadership of Afghanistan with their struggle against counterrevolution and in their stabilization of the situation of the country. We have to help the government strengthen its influence and to lead the people along the path of socialist reform.